Colorblind

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Sequel to White Leonardo has brought the captive home broken, bruised and mentally shattered. Can the love of the family reclaim the one they lost?

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A Father Waits

Disclaimer: *turns out pockets, lint and tiny moths flutter* Well, that's mine. But not TMNT.

A/N : Sequel to "White" in case you haven't read that one! This is also the scene which started "Kid's Stuff"…so it's been kicking around for a while! Anyway, enough from me!

A Father Waits

The candles sank lower, casting shadows across the wall. They danced over sleek gray fur. Splinter knelt, his shoulders loose, before the low table in his room. His thumb traced the cover of a worn leather book.

Happy Birthday, Master Splinter.

His claws tapped over the Sharpie scrawled sentiment. It had been three months since he'd last seen his child's face. Three long months he had forbidden himself from touching this book. From remembering how his son, *all* his sons, had been. Somehow, opening the photo album felt like a betrayal. As if he had given up on ever seeing him again.

He perked at movement near the door, but it was only an orange paw bapping at the lower corner. Klunk poked his head into the bedroom and looked around before meeting Splinter's gaze. He trotted inside, circling to sit at the old rat's side, and stared up at him with unwavering attention.

Splinter tipped his head. "Good evening."

That kick-started a purr. Splinter smiled and reached to scratch behind the cat's ear. Klunk pushed his nose into the cool palm. He crawled into the ninja master's lap and leaned into the thin chest.

Splinter looked around, warily, before stroking the cat beneath his chin. His black eyes returned to the book before him.

"This is not a defeat, you understand," he said softly. "I…I only wish to see him."

Klunk purred his consent and the book opened.

Instantly, tears tingled. Four bright faces beamed back at him, seven years old and carefully clutching new weapons. Eager, innocent, and free of the burdens they shouldered now. These were the faces he still expected to greet him at the breakfast table. His first photo of them.

His mouth turned down. Normal fathers had reminders of midnight feedings, first steps, baths, and trials with spaghetti. Normal fathers didn't have to fish outdated cameras from the bottom of a dumpster. Normal fathers didn't have to fish at the bottom of a dumpster, period.

He flipped the page and laughed. Then again, *normal* fathers never had a dazed Donatello staggering to them with a blackened face. They did not have Michelangelo proudly showing off his first broken arm and matching skateboard. Nor Leonardo's nervous smile as he balanced twenty feet in the air. They never saw the defiance in Raphael's grin as he sat surrounded by a mess of overdue homework.

Birthdays. Donatello's first working engine. Glittering piles of Halloween candy. All four of them crowded together to show off their first bruises from the Foot. Raphael and Donatello beaming from beneath the Battle Shell. Klunk's eyes glowing from the depths of a Christmas tree. Michelangelo gloating over his Battle Nexus trophy. Then the youngest looking far more subdued as he looped his rematch medal about a severe and awkward Leonardo's neck.

Far beyond his walls, the garage door opened. Klunk lifted his head.

Splinter raised his eyes from the album with a sigh. His sons had snuck out again. And *again* he had been left in the dark concerning their plans. But at least they had gone together. They hadn't done so since the incident. He had sensed the growing rift between them these last few months. Whenever he tried to speak of it, he got brush-off shrugs and vague smiles assuring him that everything was okay.

That "okay" had erupted two nights ago.

He had heard nothing of the escalating fight until a crash brought him running to the living room. He arrived in time to see Leonardo rise from the rug with a bleeding lip and wild eyes. But the arrival of the father had cut any further violence short. He had demanded to know what happened and was answered with silence. Short and vicious, the fight hung between them. Their eyes warred with everything left unsaid. Fingers twitched with unfinished punches. And then Leonardo turned away. Splinter caught the younger one's arm before he could follow.

His son's eyes burned, furiously, but he waited until the front door closed. Once the leader was gone, he pulled free and vanished into the upstairs sanctuary of his room. Well, his anger and frustration could be dealt with in time. What had frightened Splinter that night had been what he had seen flash across his eldest's face.

It was the stony resolve and reckless abandon which had almost consumed him once before. The same grim light only the Ancient One had managed to still.

Splinter shook his head. He couldn't lose Leonardo again. Not now.

The front door banged open.

He winced at the brief bite of Klunk's rear claws into his leg. He rose and followed the tabby to investigate. His ears lifted at the sound of all three of them hurriedly whispering. Just as he reached the living

room, the last shell disappeared into Donatello's lab. Splinter strained to separate their frantic words.

"Easy! Put him down. Gently!"

Adrenaline spiked through him.

"Leo, we're *being* gentle."

"Watch his head!"

"I have him."

The rat was in a full out run when he jumped the three steps leading up to the lab. His bad leg gave a jolt with his landing, but he ignored it. He threw open the door and stumbled into harsh fluorescent light.

Three turtles looked up and sucked in breaths of surprise. Leonardo straightened, a soaked sweatshirt clinging to him and glassy fear filling his face. Donatello rushed forward, babbling a warning which went unheard.

Splinter stared at the examination table.

His child lay limp upon it, thin and sallow-skinned. One wasted leg hung over the edge of the bed. His face was turned away, but even so, the sunken cheek was evident.

"Master…" He barely recognized Leonardo's voice.

Memories no photo album could contain struck him in the chest. When the rat spoke, his voice was as broken and weak as the still form before him.

"Raphael?"

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* Man, I'm so *not* with the sneaky! It's Raphie. Please forgive me, Zathura! Reviews and critiques are always welcome!

Leo Rescues Again

Disclaimer: TMNT is property of Eastman, Laird, and Nickelodeon.

A/N : Whoo-hoo! Thank you reviewers and story alerters. Got Chapter 2 for ya!

Leo Rescues…Again

3 Months Earlier…

Blood pooled beneath his knee and a curse slipped past clenched teeth. Strong hands closed over the wound as if the pressure would magically knit the muscle back together. He shook himself. The cut wasn't deep enough to be fatal, but ***man*** *. It frickin' stung.*

He swore again, glaring at the bodies strewn between himself and the lip of the roof where his brothers had vanished. He could hear the sound of the continuing battle rising from the alley.

He had been finishing up with his opponent when he saw Leo and Don take off after the fleeing remains of the Foot. He watched Mikey somersault, kick over the edge, and give him a boisterous wave before he, too, vanished.

" *Stupid kid," he grinned and tossed the limp warrior aside. He had taken four steps after them when one of the sprawled shadows suddenly lurched upright. Raphael had leapt back in surprise, but the katana sliced across his thigh all the same.*

He snarled at the now officially unconscious man with a feeling the guy would be taking measures never to cross "the red one" again. Raph clicked his tongue as shouts and smacks of wood and steel upon flesh continued to rise.

C'mon, guys! How long does it take ta bring down a coupla Foot geeks?

Movement.

Raphael spun to his left, narrowing his eyes at five figures outlined against the opposite building. Centermost was a slender form covered head-to-toe in steel armor. She stepped down and her guards followed. Raph growled, his hands abandoning the wound in favor of his sai.

" *S'up, Karai?" he said coldly. "Nuthin' on TV tonigh'?"*

The woman paused just beyond his strike range. "You are injured."

" *Ain't nuthin' a band-aid can't fix."*

Slowly, she moved to his right. Raphael shifted so he could keep track of both her and her goons. His skin crawled at the familiar ring of katanas unsheathing. "That is excellent. I have no use for a dead turtle."

At some unseen signal, her guards attacked. Raph lunged to his feet, deflecting each blow with his own weapons. He ducked and jumped back, hissing as the gash split wider on his landing. He drove an elbow into the gut of one man and the hilt of his sai jammed into the temple of another. Both men dropped behind him. He spun to avoid a slashing blade and all but stumbled right into Karai.

He twisted aside before they could collide. But his wounded leg was left exposed and, in a flash, her steely fist pounded into the gash. Pain burst inside his stomach and Raphael hit his tail. He grabbed the wound as a fiery pulse consumed his leg and crawled up his side. His voice cracked with his curse.

Panting, he tried to roll back to his feet only to collapse again. Grit and tar dug into his hip. He threw a furious glare to the woman.

" *Relax, Raphael. You will be taken care of."*

Then, a rooftop and eternity away, Michelangelo's laughter drifted between them. Raph heard Leo barking orders and Donatello's sharp battle cry. The turtle's eyes locked with the woman's and he threw himself to the side, scrambling for his brothers' voices.

His mouth opened to call for them, but a light step came too close behind him and his vision blossomed with stars.

His sai clattered upon the rooftop.

The back of Donatello's thumb ran anxiously across his lower lip. He paced around his lab, grabbing supplies at random only to shove them back into place with a frustrated grunt. His gaze cut, venomously, to the lab door where Leo had vanished to explain the night's events to Splinter.

Meaning their master now had more information on the current patient than the resident "doctor" did. Maybe if he drank more tea, he'd be privy to information too. He slammed a cupboard, making the steel container vibrate.

Raphael had dropped off into his delirious sleep on the way home and Leonardo had been almost catatonic himself. He had slouched in his seat, glaring out at the frigid night as if it had insulted him. He had left Don to maneuver April's van in and out of traffic in a frantic silence. Mikey had been in the back, hugging Raph to his chest to make the wild ride more bearable. And all the while Donatello had felt the blue gaze constantly switching between the brothers in the front. Waiting for one of them to break the silence.

A futile wait, it seemed. Leo had revived himself long enough to move Raph into the lab and now he was gone again. And he had left the younger pair with no clue as to what had happened in that warehouse.

Donnie's light growl rumbled as he passed by his workstation where a pair of sai were carefully crossed one over the other. Found

abandoned on a rooftop three months ago after the Foot had vanished into the night. He couldn't bear to think that their owner had been whittled down to the ruined frame on his table. The frightening remains of a once-strong warrior.

He ground his teeth. *It's Raph, genius. You've patched him up hundreds of times. Fix this!*

Don drew a breath and retuned his attention back to his patient. He frowned. Truth be told, the lack of physical injury shocked him. He had feared they'd find their brother cut to ribbons. But aside from the obvious weight loss, an odd pair of scorch marks at his temples, a long healed scar on his thigh, and a small incision on his side…he seemed fine. No broken bones. No torn muscles. No infection or temperature. Scrapes and bruises here and there, but none of them were serious. It was as if Karai hadn't wanted to inflict any lasting damage. He honestly wondered what she had done for the past months.

Donnie stopped, staring straight ahead.

Had he really just thought that?

He jumped as a hand closed about his wrist. Mikey was leaning over Raph, holding his arm, and frowning.

"You say something, Mike?"

"I said you gotta relax before you have an aneurism or something." Donnie scowled and tried to pull away, but Mikey's grip tightened. The older turtle blew out a sigh and forced his muscles to unclench a fraction.

It was enough. Mikey released him and sank back to his seat at Raph's shoulder. Donatello went to a closet and pulled an IV stand and a bag of solution to the table.

Courtesy of Dr. Stockman , he thought grimly.

It had been Raph's idea to sneak back into the demolished Stocktronics building after the police and fire department had cleaned up. Just to see what they could find before the company reclaimed the tech which survived the explosions.

"That's called looting," Donnie had said, doubtfully.

He could still hear Raph's deep laugh. "I'd call it Productive Salvaging from the jerk that jes tried ta kill us, bro."

And despite the bottle of Pepto-Bismal Donnie had downed trying to keep that trip a secret from Splinter, they owed much of their current medical supplies to that adventure.

Raph's idea.

He sighed and hooked the bag onto the stand.

"So…are you still mad?"

Donnie hesitated before glancing to his little brother. He let out a huff and went to a tool chest to dig for a clean syringe.

"It was a bad night, Donnie. You know Leo didn't mean…"

"Mike," he said, nodding to their unconscious sibling. "Now might not be the time for this."

"Just saying…" Mikey fell into silence as Don lifted Raph's arm. The inventor ran a finger along dozens of injection marks peppering the dark elbow. His brow fell and he cupped his palm, protectively, over the softer flesh.

C'mon, Raph , he willed as he extended the arm. He waited for those fierce eyes to snap open and a thunderous voice to demand they stop "pawin'" at him. He waited to have to fight him back onto the table while Raph cursed and flailed and swore revenge.

His brother only breath slow and even as if to mock him.

Don started again when Mikey's voice broke the quiet. "Cuz, you know, you tend to keep things inside until they totally explode everywhere. And we don't need a repeat of the other night like ever, right?"

"Mikey," Don cast him a weary look. "You want to help? Grab a sterilizer from the drawer behind you."

The youngest's face fell. "Sure, Don."

He watched him go with a small twitch of guilt. Donnie sighed and promised he would apologize once Raph was stabilized. Wiping a clean path over Raph's elbow, he searched for an open space along the vein. He grabbed the syringe from the table and blinked when the needle trembled in his hand. His gaze shifted to the mutilated flesh and sweat tingled as he realized he was about to re-assault it.

"So," Mikey said, casually appearing at his shoulder. "Wha'cha doin'?"

Donnie closed his eyes. Mike leaned in from the end of the table, his hands on either side of Raph's feet. His face was a mask of innocence, but Mikey knew full well that Don tended to relax if could talk and work at the same time. The older brother offered a grateful smile and returned to his task.

"I'm going to get a blood sample for you to take over to Leatherhead. He's got better equipment to find out what they've been pumping into him. Then we'll have a starting point on how to treat him. I'll feel better when we've got an IV and can monitor his stats, but we'll get a jump on fix -"

The needle touched dark skin.

Raphael's heel slammed into Mikey's chest, sending him crashing into the opposite wall. Don didn't have time to gasp before thick fingers caught above his wrist. In a flash, his shell rang off the metal cabinets. Raph's other hand clamped down on the smaller neck.

They were braced beak-to-beak. Raph's wild stare jumped between Don's eyes and his lip curled back with sudden rage.

"You."

Don let out a strangled gurgle as Raph's arm flexed. The younger turtle slid up and up until his toes left the ground. His clawed at the iron fingers with his own. The syringe slipped from the hand pinned at his waist. It clattered and rolled away between Raph's spread feet. Once it was gone, Raph's left hand abandoned the wrist to join its companion at his brother's throat. His eyes were narrow slits of gold.

"Raphie!" Mike grabbed his shoulder. "It's us, Raph! Let him -"

His elbow shot outward, snapping Mikey's neck back as a spurt of blood shot from the sea-green turtle's nose. Mike staggered, watching in horror as Don's legs gave a feeble twitch. Light brown eyes rolled towards the ceiling and his teeth were bared in a silent scream. Raphael's entire being shook in effort to keep him up.

"Deo!" Mikey cried through his pouring nose. " *Madda Sp'inta* !"

"Raph!"

Leonardo barreled into the lab with the rat on his heels. He blew past Mikey and tackled his enraged brother around the middle. Don's shell shrieked as he slid down the cabinets, an ugly gasp pulling into his lungs.

Raphael was clawing and kicking at the leader and Leo ducked to shield his face from the onslaught. He caught a punch to a head and struggled to keep his hold on his twisting and frothing sibling. Raph's body might have atrophied, but his anger certainly hadn't. And all while he fought, he kept his deranged focus aimed at Donatello.

Leo dropped his weight, sweeping his leg around to kick Raph's out from beneath him. They both went down, but with a sickening crack,

Raphael's head bounced off the cement. The fight went out of him instantly.

"Raph!" Leo fought to free himself and knelt at his side. "I'm sorry! Are you all right?"

Bleary gold eyes rolled. Raph shook his head, still growling.

"Don'…let 'im…Leo…"

"I'ts okay, Raph. You're safe. Donnie wasn't going to hurt you."

"He's here… *she's* here…"

"No. Karai's nowhere near us. She doesn't know where you are."

Raph's hand caught his sword strap and jerked him down. "Donnie's *hers* , Leo. He's workin'…fer the Foot…"

Ice skimmed over the leader's skin. Raphael's grip fell loose and he slumped backward.

Leonardo slowly rose to his feet, panting. He looked up into Mikey's eyes which were huge above the wrist pad trying to staunch his nose. His gaze slid past him to where Splinter was holding a rigid Donatello. The young turtle's face was slack with shock.

"I'm *what* ?"

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* Well…it's Raph. It couldn't be a *peaceful* homecoming. Penny for your thoughts?

Challenged

Disclaimer: TMNT is the property of Eastman, Laird, and Nickelodeon

A/N : Thank you all for the wonderful comments on this story so far! Sorry for the shortness of this chapter. Keep the scenes apart and they're too short, put them together, they get too long! And one small curse snuck in.

Challenged

Five limps one way, turn, five limps back. Stitches pulled beneath the bandage wrapped tight around his thigh. The nagging little tugs were doing nothing to help his rising claustrophobia. Raphael had never considered himself a claustrophobic, but if he tripped in any way, he'd strike a wall. A decrepit single bed with loose springs took up most of the space, allowing only the narrow trail he was currently breaking in.

Way too close of quarters.

"Quit thinkin' on it," he growled, shaking his head. "Ya grew up underground. Get over it. There ain't nothin' 'bout this birdcage that should mess ya up."

He leaned against the wall and smirked. At least, *now* there was nothing that could bother him. He looked to the opposite corner where the demolished remains of a security camera lay.

It had been staring at him when he'd woken. One lidless eye hiding countless faces. Raph found out real quick the only thing that irked him more than being caged was the thought of being watched while in that cage. It had been a delicate, digital job and he vaguely wondered if it recorded in HD before smashing it into nothing.

One satisfying victory in a stupid-ass situation.

The heavy steel door broke open with a squeal. Karai stepped into his cell holding a steaming bowl. A guard eased in behind her, his katana already drawn as he blocked any escape. Raph shot him a look of contempt and stepped sideways onto the bed, snarling.

Karai nodded towards the camera. "I expect you to keep your violence to a minimum while you are here."

He barked out a laugh. "Sorry, we eva meet before?"

"The camera was in place for your safety, Raphael. I want to be sure you are treated fairly in my care." She held the bowl out to him.

Raph lifted his nose and took it, careful their fingers never touched. The contents were gray, grainy and more fluid than oatmeal.

"Wow," he said, curling his lip. "Ya shouldn' have."

"It's a protein supplement. It will keep up your strength as well as heal your injuries."

He glanced up. "There a reason ya just went plural on me?" Karai lowered her chin with a light smile. Growling, he extended his arm and tipped the bowl. Gray slime splattered across her shoes. "No, thanks."

The bowl flew at the guard, who caught the remaining goo across his chest.

Karai looked at the mess for a moment, then cleared her throat. "I don't suppose you've put any thought into why you've been brought here?"

Raph leaned back, touching his shell to the wall. "I suppose it's got nothin' ta do with Leo?"

"Oh, he'll see fit to involve himself, I'm sure. But no, Leonardo is not the sole reason." She folded her arms, thoughtfully. "A few weeks ago, an employee leaked information to a business rival. While I was

going about the nasty business of terminating his career with our corporation, something occurred to me."

She looked to him, expectantly, and Raph shrugged. "Am I supposed ta be carin'?"

Karai ignored the question. "I thought to myself: how would my father handle this?"

Raph's arrogant grin slipped.

"As you know, my father had very little tolerance for those who disappointed him. I've grown soft in his absence, Raphael, and now I believe it's time to reinstate his policies here at Saki Enterprises."

Her eyes gleamed as she watched his dark throat work. "What's that got ta do with me?"

"Mr. Fletcher isn't the only one who has disappointed me. I thought your family could be valuable allies. But Leonardo betrayed me. Your father and brothers abandoned me. And you…" She gave a gentle scoff. "Well, there's never been any love lost between us, has there?"

His eyes narrowed.

"You are here for restitution. You will shoulder the crimes of your family."

"Really?" Raph said, unimpressed. "The whole family? Not jes one or two?"

Her smile vanished and she pushed from the wall. "I would not be so impudent, Raphael. You will break within these walls. Beyond them I strip you of your pride, your conviction, your sanity, and that defiance you cherish so. And when your spirit has wasted to nothing and I've gleaned everything from you, only then will I consider returning you to your disgusting family."

His eyes glittered beneath his brow. "Flippant."

"What?" she snapped.

"I was bein' flippant. Not impudent. Ya eva think ya migh' be overreactin' ta things?" Fury flashed over her face and he waved his hand. "Nothin' personal, Donnie accuses me of it all the time."

Her lip drew back. "That tongue of yours is going to bring you trouble."

"It ain't never brought more than I could handle," he sneered back. "Ya like ta think ya can break me, girly? Bring it on."

Karai stepped to the bed and her guard tensed, easing closer, but Raphael never moved. He just stared back at her, coldly, as she hissed. "I intend to."

His dark laughter followed her from the cell, cutting off when the steel door slammed.

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* Setup chapter, bleh. Thoughts, suggestions, questions, and reviews are all welcome here!

Mikey Takes a Stand

Disclaimer: Still no owning unfortunately.

A/N : I want to thank you all for helping me through a rough work week! Yeesh, folks were crabby! So I have Chapter 4 for ya and there's some length to it! Well, more than Chapter 3, anyway…

Mikey Takes a Stand

Leonardo closed Raph's door and paused, setting his forehead against the wood. He stared down at his feet feeling odd, hollowed out as if all his fear, adrenaline, and strength were pooling beneath his heels. His sinuses were cold with every breath. There were tiny tingles at the ends of his fingers. His lower lip stung as his tongue touched chapped crevices. And every blink lined his eyes with a wetness.

Good grief, he was falling apart.

Although, after the night he'd had, maybe it was warranted.

Silence had engulfed the family even as Raph's accusation of Donnie rang in their ears. The second youngest sat staring at his brother with pain and confusion wrecking havoc across his face.

"Leo…sensei, you know I-I would never -"

Splinter had set his hand upon his son's shoulder. "Of course not, Donatello. Do not think on it. We must bring your brother elsewhere now. The laboratory is not suitable, it seems."

"But," Donnie's eyes fluttered as he shook his head, "the IV. His…"

"We will make do," the rat said. "Michelangelo, are you all right?"

He nodded, flashing a thumbs up.

"Then clean yourself, quickly. I want you and Donatello to move the spare bed from storage into Raphael's room. I do not trust that rope thing he sleeps on."

The younger pair vanished to do his bidding while Splinter and Leonardo examined Raphael. They managed to haul him up onto Leo's back. He staggered once beneath his brother's weight, but with Splinter's soft encouragement, the leader managed to give Raph a piggy-back up to the second story and to his cool room.

They found Mikey had done them one better than the lumpy, stained bed they'd kept "just in case". It was Mike's own queen mattress shoved against Raph's wall, the pillow resting just beneath the loose cords of the hammock. A red handprint marred the lower corner. Both Mike and Don were gone by the time their father and brother arrived. Mikey was probably soaking through a roll of paper towels, but Leo felt a tug of irritation that Donnie was not there oversee the transport of his patient.

Once Raph had been settled, Leo shucked off the sweatshirt which had been stifling him all night. He tossed it at the foot of the bed as Splinter eased down next to Raph's shoulder. A splash of red spilled from the sweatshirt's front pocket and the leader carefully pulled Raph's mask (entangled with his own) free. Shoulders sagging, he had tied his bandana back to its proper place and ran the red fabric through his fingers.

"I'll get you a chair, master."

An ear flicked towards him. "You will do no such thing." Leonardo looked up in surprise as his father turned to him and gently took his hand. Splinter's eyes were filled with tears as he met his young warrior's gaze. "You have brought your brother home, Leonardo. Thank you for doing what I could not."

"Father…"

"Go and take some well deserved rest, my son. That is your only task for this night."

Thinking on this order, Leo stared at his feet, helplessly, forehead pressed into the chipped wood of Raph's door. His own bedroom lay ten feet to his left. Dark, quiet, and so inviting. But he had too much to do, yet. He had to go back to lock and secure the garage and set the alarms they'd forsaken in their haste. He needed to call April and Casey so they could get some sleep of their own. He needed to be sure Mikey and Donnie were okay.

Sniffing, he pushed from the door and moved toward the hall.

"Bah!" he fell back against the frame.

Donatello had been right at his shoulder, narrow-eyed, arms folded, and looking spectacularly ticked off.

Leo's hand slapped his chest. "Donnie, what -?"

"So I work for the Foot?" he asked, huskily.

The leader straightened and offered a weak smile. "That was a first for me, too."

Donnie's brow lifted. "How would I know that? You haven't said two words to us since Karai's. I was hoping after the lone gunman act and the kamikaze jaunt into Foot central, that maybe I'd be lucky enough to get some answers. But no," his face twisted with bitterness, "mighty Leo's got it covered. I get nothing."

"Don…"

He swiped Leo's words aside with a sharp flick of his wrist. "Do you have any idea what it was like for me and Mike to watch you walk into that building? Do you have the slightest clue how it felt to just sit there with you in that warehouse?" he stepped closer, danger radiating off him like Leo had never seen. "Do you understand what it

might be like to see your brothers come stumbling out of the dark and have them both go into shock at your side while your trying to get us all home in one piece? And then to get nothing. Frick, Leo, what am I supposed to do with…how on earth…I mean, I'm frickin' supposed to…" he waved weakly towards Raph's room, panting.

Leo's dark eyes glittered as he studied his little brother. The bruises gathering around the inventor's neck seemed more defined against his paler, sleep deprived, neck. Don's eyes were touched with fear and desperation and something about the way his mouth tugged down threatened he was about to burst into tears.

It took everything Leo had not to throw a hug on him. But Donnie's barbs were exposed and he opted out. "Don, what happened downstairs, it was -"

"I *swear* , Leo," sparks flew over brown eyes, "if you take responsibility for that, you're going to get a test tube shoved where the sun don't shine."

He frowned. "Then what do you want from me?"

Donnie scoffed, incredulous. "Are you effing *kidding* me, Leo? What do I want? I want to know what the hell happened to you in there! I want to know what's going on!"

"Uh, guyths?"

"What?" Don snapped as they both looked to the right. Mikey fell back a step, lifting a bag of potato chips in defense. A pair of Kleenexes were shoved up his nostrils. He looked between them with matching shiners blossoming beneath his eyes.

His brow fell. "Ad fund ad dis convo deems to be goin', I dink Dad'ded hab an eadier dime hebbin Raph seeb if choo werend't fiding judd oudhide hid door!"

The older brothers blinked and Leo cocked his head. "What?"

"Michelangelo!" Splinter's muffled scold drifted through the door.

"Dorry, densei," he said, automatically. Mikey pointed to them. "Libbing room, *dow* ."

Don and Leo glared at one another and trudged downstairs to the darkened entertainment area. Mikey followed close behind and tossed his chips onto the couch before squaring off with them. He lifted his chin to look down on his taller siblings.

"O'day, I'b had it…"

"Mike," Donnie lifted his hand, wearily. "I can't get in trouble from someone who sounds like that."

"I - huh?" He rolled his eyes and yanked the Kleenex from his nose. Dropping his hands to his knees, he inhaled sharply.

Snnniiiick-k-k-k! Gulp.

"Nice, Mike," Leo said, wryly. Don's jaw fell in horror.

The youngest shivered as he straightened, dabbing his wrist band at his nose. "Okay, we good now? I have *had* it, guys. Up to here." He lifted his hand above their heads. "See that? That's me trying to deal with you two. Guess who's no longer having fun?"

"Mikey," Leo said with a faint warning.

"Is talking right now, *Leo* ," he snapped. The leader slowly closed his mouth. The orange banded brother shook his head. "I mean, come on, guys. Raph's back and his sick. Leo, when you said he'd need us when he got back, I didn't think you meant for us to be at each other's throats." The older pair snuck each other a look. "You guys fought the other night, crazy things are gonna happen. Now get over it. Let's all just drop this weird tension and find out why Raph thinks Donnie's working for our favorite psycho-chick and why he made me swallow my own blood!" He took a deep breath and waited.

Leonardo felt his and Don's eyes on him while he kept his own locked on the floor. "I don't know why he thinks your in league with the Foot, Don. Or why he didn't recognize Mikey at all. I just…" Something danced across his face and cold fear dropped into Donatello's stomach.

An olive green hand steadied the leader and gently pushed him to sit on the couch. When Don spoke, his voice was his normal, soothing tone. "Try the beginning, Leo."

"Yeah," Mikey said, plopping onto the coffee table. He hooked his legs up beneath himself. "We dropped you off outside Karai's…"

A weak smile flitted at Leo's mouth and was scrubbed away by his fingers. He closed his eyes and lowered his chin. "Yeah, yeah, okay."

Splinter tucked the blankets around Raphael's shoulders, pausing when his son shifted, restless, in his sleep. He cursed himself when he realized he'd been holding his breath. Despite what had happened downstairs, he refused to allow himself to feel any nervousness about his son. Raphael was not his enemy, he did not deserve to sense any apprehension from his father.

He set his palm across the turtle's forehead, thankful that he could. Though Raph's strength had diminished, he was still there. Breathing, occupying his proper space in their home, volatile as ever, still his Raphael.

"Come back to us," he whispered. "You can find the way."

How long had he waited to sit at his side? To whisper assurances and hear the familiar growl of "Masta" break the silence. The attack on Donatello would have to be addressed quickly, of course, but was easily dealt with. Raphael would feel terrible about it once he woke, Splinter knew that. Prone to fighting as he was, the hot-headed turtle would never attempt to harm one of his brothers in his right mind. And he knew Donatello would be more than willing to forgive him.

His ears twitched at a hushed argument growing outside and he sighed. He had not intervened on his children's spats in many years. They were old enough to work through their problems together. But this festering animosity between Donatello and Leonardo did not have the luxury to play itself out. Raphael need all of them united if he ever had hope of coming home.

A third voice joined theirs, nasally and much louder. The rat frowned.

"Michelangelo!"

"Hmm?"

Splinter spun back to the bed, not even hearing Mikey's apology. Raph shifted again, his brow creasing as he muttered to himself. "Thievery…con…con, uh…justice…"

"My son?" Splinter leaned forward just as golden eyes cracked open.

Raph blinked, sleepily, and turned towards his father. "S-sensei? M'I dreamin'?"

Splinter smiled and cupped a green cheek in his palm. "I'm here, child."

"Sensei," Raph moved to sit up and gasped. He curled on himself, hugging his arms with a faint hiss. He opened a hand, frowning into his palm. "Why do I hurt so bad?"

"You exerted much energy before, my son. I believe you're just stiff after…well, after the confrontation with your brothers."

Raph looked up, wide-eyed. "We fought? Is that how we got away from Karai?"

Splinter's smile faded and Raph cocked his head. The fur lining the rat's back rose. There was an openness to Raph's face that had not been seen since…he could not even put a year to it. His eyes were too wide, innocent almost in a way which reminded him of…

"Sensei, you all right?" Raph asked in a soft rasp that was far from his own gruffness.

He blinked and smiled. "Of course, Raphael. But don't you recall? When your brothers brought you home, you -" Splinter hesitated at the deep frown he was suddenly receiving. "Is something wrong?"

Raphael grinned, nervously. "Um, no, sensei. It's just, I think you must be tired. I'm…I'm *Mikey* , remember?"

---

* In the words of my favorite rabbit: Ain't I stinker? Wha'cha thinkin'?

TV Rots the Brain

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TV Rots the Brain

Raphael wondered in later weeks if his first night of captivity wasn't the hardest. After he had paced himself out, he finally stretched over the grimy bed, betting himself he'd end up with lice or bed bugs or small pox from the thing. A bet he thankfully lost.

Silence pressed against his ears, smothering his thoughts. Leo and Donnie could easily get lost in their own heads in quiet times. Even Mikey could amuse himself if the need arose. Not Raph, he needed background noise in his life. Silence was all well and good when it came to disappearing into your surroundings or slipping past humans, unnoticed. He was fine as long as there was a purpose to it. But the droning non-sound of being alone had a tendency to set his teeth on edge.

He had a noise machine for the nights back home, set to rain. Well, it wasn't so much rain anymore as a constant rushing with random splashes. Donnie had gotten it for his birthday when they were kids. Mikey had made a joke about it when he discovered his big brother still used it. Just one. Some things weren't meant to be teased: a turtle's sound machine is one of them.

He missed Mikey. He missed the constant chatter about nothing. He missed ill-timed comments and the familiar tingle in his palm after smacking him upside the head.

Raph rolled his eyes and slapped a palm over them. It hadn't been two days and he was sapping out. He focused on the bare bulb above and waited. Waited for the distant sound of an explosion which would signal his brothers' arrival.

He didn't know when he finally drifted off, but he woke with the sudden piercing squeal of his cell door. Peeling his nerves from the ceiling, he glared at the two soldiers who entered.

"Eva hear'a knockin'? I could'a been in my nakeds here!"

"The Mistress has summoned you."

"Summoned?" Raph grinned, lifting his brow. "Too bad I'm swamped righ' now. Gotta meetin' with the mayor, she'll hafta reschedule."

The men exchanged a look and the speaker stepped for the bed. Raph's feet hit cement and he backed up, fists loose and teeth bared. "Gonna take more'n you two ta drag my ass out ta her, pal."

"Will it?" The soldier's hand flew out and jammed a small device against the turtle's arm. Raph blinked with a scoff.

"What's that supposed -"

The lights went out.

When his world came back around, he found himself staring a pair of high heeled shoes dangling a few inches above the cement. His gaze shifted up pale legs, one crossed over the other. Raph bolted upright then, kept from gaining his feet by wide straps across his chest and arms. The steel chair was welded to the floor. He threw his shoulders from side-to-side, shell grinding against the backrest.

"Taser?" he hissed. "He tased *me* ? That scrawny, little piece'a…"

"Good evening, Raphael," Karai said from her perch on the desk before him.

He bit his tongue, fixing a murderous glare on her. It was the look he used to send grown men screaming into the night, but Karai's smile never faltered. Raph sat back, forcing himself to unclench enough to feign confidence. As if he hadn't just been drooling into his shoulder a moment earlier.

His chin jerked upward. "What's with the dress?"

She glanced down to the sleek, yet modest, black gown. "I have a dinner to attend. A charity event."

His brow flew up in surprise and he barked out a laugh. "This a normal weekend for ya? Little burglary, kidnappin', charity ball, and back home in time for some good, clean torture?"

"Torture?" Karai's mouth twitched as if he were being cute. "Please, Raphael. Torture would indicate you had something I wished to extract. This is punishment. I knew our chat last night did not sink in."

"Crimes of the family, yadda, yadda, yadda," he growled. "Yeah, I got it well and -"

He blinked as he glanced past her. Five massive TV screens formed a semi-circle around them. Gorgeous flat-screens which would have sent Mikey into a fit of joy.

Karai chuckled. "Your introduction to your punishments will also demonstrate what I spoke of last night. Ah, but before we begin." She slid from the desk and reached for him.

Raph jerked back with a snarl, but her thumb still hooked beneath his mask. The nail scraped between his eyes as she pulled it over his head. His teeth snapped, barely missing her hand, as she drew away. She smirked and carefully folded the red fabric. "There you are. Nice to finally see what's under this."

Raph sneered, hating that he felt naked *now* . "Wow. Ya got my bandana. What a feat, girly."

She hummed and returned to her seat. "A little reward for your brothers. They've put so much effort into finding you already. Well, they're going to need some encouragement in a few weeks. We wouldn't want any accidents brought about by premature vengeance, now would we?"

"Weeks?" he scoffed, hoping he'd kept his face impassive at the mention of his brothers. "Hey, I got tickets ta the game on Tuesday. Can't we wrap this up before then?"

"Oh, I promise you'll be occupied this Tuesday," she said with a slow smile. "You and your brothers pride yourselves on your unity. You are one, a team, a single entity in everything you do…including this game of mine, Raphael. You will suffer and so will they. It would have been the same if it had been Leonardo or Donatello I had found on that roof instead of you. Consider me colorblind if you will." She dropped the mask onto the desk. "This is nothing personal to you. Especially tonight as you will be serving in place of Michelangelo. Any questions?"

He stared at her, blankly. "Yeah...Ya come off any strong medications recently?"

Karai sighed and lifted an tan folder, flipping it open. "Michelangelo has been accused of thievery, conspiracy, defense of the Utrom enemy, and resisting justice. He shows the most potential for…for a change of heart. Therefore, his punishment is to be put through a re-education simulation."

Raph's forehead furrowed and he glanced back to the TVs. A small grin appeared. "Yer kiddin' me. Yer gonna try and *brainwash* me? Ain't we missin' a Nazi general or somethin'?"

"You'll only be shown some footage you may find interesting. This is the introduction, as I've said." Karai stood, gathering the mask and folder. "Now, I really am late for my event. Oh, and Raphael?"

His neck snapped from the force of her slap and he found himself gaping at the wall. He spun to her, eyes on fire. He had been punched often enough, smashed, thrown, burned, shot, and kicked in a place he *knew* was only meant to be treated kindly. But never had he felt the stinging shock which could be dealt by a feminine hand.

Karai straightened. "In the future, you will address me as *Mistress* . Do you understand?"

His lip curled. "I undastand ya can go ta -"

Holy crap, there was the wall again! Water poured from his eye as he turned back.

"You will also keep a civil tongue or it will be cut out. Do you understand, Raphael?"

Fists curled on top of the armrests. "Oi, Karai?"

"Yes?"

"Eat me."

She stepped back, unimpressed, and walked briskly past him. "Enjoy the show, Raphael."

"I ain't gettin' popcorn?" A heavy door slammed behind him. "Guess not."

He glared at his grey reflection in the glass and snorted. Hypno-screens, really? She had to be joking. This was the dumbest thing he'd ever -

The air exploded with a screeching alarm. Raph flinched, snapping his straps tight. The lights flashed around him, sending wild shadows across the walls. Music, if it could be called that, blared against the alarm and vibrated through his chest.

The silence of his cell suddenly had new appeal.

"Hey!" he roared, unable to hear himself. "Knock it off! Hey!"

The screens flashed. Blue, red, purple, orange over and over until his eyes ached. Then the lights went out, plunging him into darkness and quiet. He panted against the whine in his ears.

Once again, the TVs snapped on. He blinked against the brightness as white noise spewed from the speakers. Red words scrawled across the glass.

YOU BELIEVE YOU WERE CAREFUL?

YOU THINK YOU WENT UNSEEN?

WE WERE ALWAYS WATCHING, RAPHAEL.

What the hell?

The center screen flickered, bringing up a shot of New York's skyline still grey with morning. The lens shifted, zooming in on an empty rooftop. Four shadows darted over the asphalt, their laughter strange and tinny in the speakers. The camera pushed in until the tell-tale silhouette of Leonardo's swords could be seen rising above his shoulders. He hopped onto the edge of the roof.

"Come on, slowpokes! Sun's nearly up!"

Raph started as his own voice broke through. "And would it kill us ta watch a sunrise, Fearless?"

"Oh, yeah!" Mikey shrieked, shrilly. "And catch breakfast at the IHOP!"

"IHOP's way across town," Donnie said lightly as he trotted to Leo.

Raph's blood ran cold.

"Um, hello? Totally worth it for the cinnamon pancake stack." Mikey ran and leapt into a handstand next to his brother. "Raph, Leo's always trying to deprive me of my cinnamon fix."

"Tell someone who cares, dipstick," the Raphael on screen shoved the legs before him aside and Mikey twisted to catch himself with a laugh.

"We're *not* getting pancakes," Leo said and Raph could still see his tolerant grin in his mind's eyes. "And father will kill us if we stagger in after sunup. So, keep moving, boys."

Raph swore. That had been two days ago. The morning before his capture. He watched, dry-mouthed, as the four shadows vanished.

CHERISHED MOMENTS.

The screen showed a lopsided view of the ruin remains of the Foot's original weapons storage. Mikey came into sight, catching himself out of a back flip. His nunchuks were a blur as he danced on his toes and swung at nothing. He doubled over suddenly and stumble off screen. In the background, a hovercraft spun out of control, bolts of electricity shooting from its nose.

Their assault on the Shredder's stronghold.

BATTLES FOUGHT.

Flames danced across a dark courtyard and erupted from the topmost floor of Shredder's tower. A crumpled figure lay on the white stone of the building's steps. Leonardo approached the decapitated form and knelt to retrieve his swords from its sides. In the wavering orange light, his face seemed cold and merciless.

THE WAGES, RAPHAEL.

Another night. Another alley. Michelangelo laughed as he brought soldier after soldier down with the sound of cracking bone.

THE WAGES FOR SIN.

Donatello knelt in the engine room of the Foot's oil tanker. He dropped back from a mess of wires, set a timer at his wrist, and ducked behind the equipment. The film stuttered forward to the resulting explosion. The side of the ship burst outward towards the eagerly awaiting ocean.

THE WAGES FOR SIN IS

Night vision filled all five screens. Raphael saw himself on a rooftop, kicking a limp man aside. He walked through scattered bodies, running his wrist across his forehead. He paused, one hand on the fire escape, and looked back over the carnage with a satisfied smirk. His eyes were silvery green and empty as they passed over the hidden camera. The tape froze.

Raphael blinked, face-to-face with his own ghostly stare.

DEATH.

The screen went black.

---

* Oy (face palms)…"Re-education screening" sounded a lot better in White before I tried to show it. My least favorite punishment, I won't put you guys through it again, I promise. (walks off, shaking head) Hypno-screens…sweet Moses!

** Your thoughts please?

Broken

Disclaimer : TMNT is property of Eastman, Laird, and Nickelodeon

A/N : Thank you all once again, you guys rock. Cyber-hugs to everyone!

Broken

A beat of silence passed between them.

Splinter blinked with a sharp shake of his head. "What did you say?"

Raphael folded his legs beneath him, wincing as he did so, and hooked his hands at his crossed ankles. "I'm *Mikey* . You know, the cute one." His chin lifted proudly, but then his grin faded. "You okay, sensei?"

The rat inhaled, overwhelmed by the odd combination of Raphael's deep voice and Michelangelo's lighter rasp. And despite the state of his second-oldest was in, he found himself waiting for a sharp "Gotcha!" which never came. There was no joke behind Raphael's face, no small pull of repressed grin, not a trace of kidding. He waited eagerly with his elbows propped on his knees and soft concern filling his golden irises.

But, Raphael couldn't *really* believe this, could he?

"Sensei?"

Splinter's gaze was drawn back to the too-innocent face. If it was true, what should be done? How was he to manage the situation? Should he go along with the illusion or confront him with the truth? Which would be less damaging to his son? An unfamiliar panic slid icy fingers about his chest.

"Yes?"

Raph offered a small smile. "I missed you."

Slim shoulders crumpled in defeat. "I…I have missed you too. So very much." He leaned forward and hugged his son, holding him as if he were made of glass. Raph's arm snaked around his back to return the gesture, his forehead pressed into Splinter's chest. A tiny tremor ran through him and the rat drew away.

"How badly do you hurt, my son?"

Raph grinned and touched the back of his skull. "Here a little bit. I musta hit my noggin on the way out, huh?"

"Yes," Splinter nodded. "You struck your head…" Raph shrugged and threw his hands above his head, stretching and hissing as his muscles pulled. Splinter drew a breath with the feeling that he was about to swallow poison. "M-Michelangelo?" One gold eye cracked towards him. "Can you tell me what you remember of this night?"

Raph's arms flopped down as he rolled his eyes to the ceiling. His lower lip protruded as he thought. Splinter fought down a shiver at the absurdity of the action from Raphael and the eerie precision of Michelangelo's movement.

"Uh…we were in our room an' Karai came in to ask us some stuff. Um, oh!" He beamed at his father. "Then Leo came in and he wasn't mad at all, sensei."

Splinter's ears flew upward. "When was Leonardo angry with you?"

"Oh, not me," Raph shook his head. "Nope. He's mad at Raphie. *Big* time. But he wasn't tonight! I don't think Raph really appreciated it though." He wrinkled his nose. "He wasn' doin' so good."

"Why wasn't Raphael well?"

Raph cocked his head. "Well, I mean, you know Raphie, sensei." He giggled and ran a finger in little circles next to his temple. Splinter

frowned at the motion. "Dude couldn' take it, so we stepped up, right?"

"We?"

"Yeah," Raph dropped his chin, mischievously. "He's hidin', sensei. Leo's been after him since he came back from where the lights dance. So he started hidin'. Me and Donnie have been helpin' him ignore Leo."

Splinter's brow flew upward. "Donatello? I thought he worked for the Foot now."

Raphael scowled and shook his head. "That's the *bad* Donnie, sensei. The one out here," he waved his hand to the room around him. "He's in the place where the lights dance, too."

Splinter sighed, completely at a loss and realizing that he wasn't going to get any straight answers tonight. But he was also confused at this impersonation. Could Raphael not hear himself? Surely, the effort to lighten his voice had to strain, and his natural accent kept breaking through. Splinter found himself studying his son, desperate to find a crack in this façade of Michelangelo, an opportunity to pull Raphael out of it.

"Sensei, why you lookin' at me like that?"

His spine bent as he settled back. "I am worried about you."

Raphael blinked, shocked. "Why? Karai never did nothing to me. I'm fine. I only hadda watch some lame-o movies of us fightin'. Honest."

The furry head tipped. "Yet you are hurt." He ran a claw over the dark elbow where the injection marks marred the skin.

The turtle winced and gingerly rubbed at them. "Yeah…I guess."

"I want you to rest, Mich…my son." He couldn't say it again. He set his palm over Raph's forehead. "I am going to check on your

brothers and I will return for the rest of the night. Is that all right?"

Raphael considered for a moment, and then nodded before easing back into the covers. He hooked the sheet beneath his chin and curled into a ball. "See ya when ya get back."

Splinter rose from the bed and silently made his way to the door. A dull knot rolled beneath his lungs at the thought of bringing this new development to his children.

"Hey, sensei, one more thing…"

He glanced back. "Yes?"

"Why the *heck* am I in Raph's room?"

Splinter paused at the bottom of the stairs, feeling as though a boulder had settled across his weary shoulders. He was experienced in many things. Psychology was not among them. This was strange and unfounded territory for an old rat and he feared he would be up to the journey. He looked up to the darkened hall of the second story and sighed before turning his attention towards Leonardo's soft voice.

"Guys, I'm serious, that's all that happened."

He eased closer to the darkened entertainment unit. Leonardo sat on the couch with Donatello before him on the floor and Michelangelo cross-legged on the coffee table. Leonardo looked at neither, his gaze between his feet.

"It was like…he was a recording. He just repeated our names and what we had done to Karai. Beyond that, it was like there nothing else in his head."

Donnie stroked his lower lip and shook his head. "He certainly wasn't a recording tonight."

"Yeah," Mikey agreed, nodding vigorously.

Leo shrugged. "He could barely stand at the warehouse. I swear, guys, if I had any idea that he still had that kind of…"

"Strength?" Don offered with a lifted brow. "This is *Raph* , Leo. And what if you had known? How would you have predicted he'd…react like he did tonight?"

Leo's head tipped as if surrendering the point.

Mikey looked between them and leaned forward, cocking his head to catch the leader's gaze. "But…he's gonna be okay, right? Raph's gonna pull out of it."

Leonardo lifted haunted eyes. His mouth pressed into a thin line.

Splinter stepped forward. "Of course he will."

"Sensei!" Donnie and Mikey were on their feet in an instant. Mikey, launching from the table, leap-frogged over his brother to land at the father's feet.

"Is Raph okay?"

"How's he doing?"

"Did he wake up?"

"Was he chilled, feverish?"

"Did he say anything?"

Splinter brought his walking stick down with a loud crack, breaking the onslaught of his youngest two. "Boys, enough. Your brother did wake and he is resting now."

"But he didn't say anything?" Mikey pressed.

The rat drew a breath and leveled his eyes at the turtle. "Yes. He spoke with me. Though, he believed himself to be you, my son."

Mikey rocked back as if he'd been struck. Leo finally looked up.

"He was acting like Mikey?" Don asked softly.

"Yes. He said that *Raphael* was hiding and he was attempting to behave as Michelangelo would." He ran his claws over the back of his paw. "It was…unsettling."

Donnie glanced upward. "I wonder why. PTSD? A coping mechanism, maybe? And why *Mikey* of all people?"

"Hey." Mikey said far weaker than normal. He looked pale and worried.

"You know what I mean," Donnie said, absently. "Why you over himself?"

"Well, he is resting now," Splinter said again. "I am going to return to him, but I want you all in bed as well. We will see what tomorrow brings. Off with you." His cane shot out and caught Donatello across the chest, blocking his path. Splinter turned fierce eyes upon his son. "I understand you will want to investigate your brother's condition. But if one ray of light from your computer spills from beneath your door, so help me, Donatello…"

He received a sheepish smile. "Understood, sensei."

"I promise I will not leave his side, and if your medical skills are needed, I will fetch you. Otherwise, you are to be asleep. Go on."

Mikey and Donnie retreated to their rooms, leaving the father with the leader. Dark eyes met. One pair were filled by quiet sadness, the other by exhaustion and fear. Splinter eased himself onto the couch with a sigh. He reached out and took Leo's chin, tipping his head

aside to reveal a thin red line and a smear of crusted blood running down the side of his neck.

"You left a few details from your story, Leonardo."

Leo pulled free. "Only the unimportant ones, master." He shrugged. "Just a complication."

"I see," the rat mused. "And I believe I caught the end of your tale just now?"

"Yes, sensei. I had nearly finished before we were…interrupted."

"Hmm. Yet you never told me what you thought of all this."

Leo glanced up with a frown. "This isn't about me, sensei. Raph's the one I'm worried about."

Splinter's eyes narrowed. He rested his chin on his folded fingers at the top of his walking stick. "I recall a young student of mine who one internalized his fears and doubts and dwelled upon what *he* considered failure until he became reckless and a danger to himself…"

Leo blinked. "This is nothing like that, sensei."

"You told many lies during that time, Leonardo. I did not believe them then, and I certainly won't believe them now. Something more than weariness burdens you tonight. I will not leave you alone this time around, my son, for I fear you have been broken as well."

Leonardo looked ahead to the TV and clamped a hand over his mouth. Tension knotted along his jaw. His elbows dropped to his knees with a shake of his head. His breathing passed faster through his nose.

Splinter waited, patient as ever, as he watched the storm build.

And though he expected it to break, he was still surprised when a deep, frog-like sound ground up Leonardo's throat. His shoulders began to tremble as sudden tears coursed down paths already forged along his cheeks. His son looked up, shame rising past his ever-present stoicism.

"I was scared, sensei," he whispered. His tongue flashed at the corner of his dry mouth. "I thought…I thought I'd have to…ugh," the frog sound came at the end of his groan. Leo hugged himself about the middle, leaning forward and grinding his teeth.

Splinter scooted closer, wrapping his arms about his son and bracing as his larger son leaned into him. "Shh, Leonardo. It will be all right, my son."

His head shook again. "I don't know…" Leo's black eyes lifted to the upstairs and a tiny sob slipped by his teeth. He lowered a desperate and fearful gaze to meet the rat's.

"Father, can I tell you something awful?"

---

* Yay! Well, not yay about Leo's small breakdown, but we're at a transition point! Now things are rolling and answers are coming soon! I can see them from here! As always…reviews, critiques, questions and general wonderments are always welcome!

The Worst of You

Disclaimer: I don't own TMNT

A/N : Hello, everyone! Got Chapter 7 for ya! Sorry, it got a little chatty in this one, I guess...I blame the banter! Hope you like!

The Worst of You

A cheeseburger. That's what he needed. A double cheeseburger with everything, please. Even mustard, which he normally held in the same regard as that mystery gunk which always ends up on spare change. Load it on, friend, so long as he got the burger. And fries. Big, fat French fries loaded with salt and pepper. None of those skinny, crispy fries for him.

Or ravioli. Chicken ravioli with rosemary and cheese sauce. Ooh, spaghetti sauce. Mikey always pureed it so chunks of tomato wouldn't get caught in the noodles. Noodles, penne, no, manicotti! Yeah, he'd kill for a steaming chunk of that. Would gladly scald his tongue and mouth if he had to. It would so be worth it.

What was with the cheese dishes? Maybe he was lacking calcium...

Mmm, calcium.

Raphael rolled his eyes and turned a battered bottle between his hands. He took a few sips of tepid water and scraped his tongue at the chalky aftertaste. His suspicion of it was cemented ten minutes later by a slight headache. Nice, a sedative cocktail, isn't that great? Still, a little headache was better than dying of dehydration on his stupid bed. Stubborn as he was, even Raphael had his limit.

The food, however, was another matter.

His current meal had joined the other three and was now slowly creeping down the wall. The initial mess he'd made from Karai's bowl

had become a crusty brown and sent up wafts of eye-watering stink now and again. All the more reason he celebrated it never having touched his stomach.

Wrinkling his nose, he let the crumpled bottle fall and closed his eyes to enjoy the clatter it made. He set his foot on it and ground it side to side as he thought.

Four days, two since his little movie night. That had to be enough time. Don and Leo had to be putting the final touches on the rescue mission. Honestly, what else would they be doing? So he was hungry, big deal, his brothers were coming. He just had to hold out a little longer.

"Whaddya think, guys? 'Notha night or two and we'll be back ta bustin' heads?"

He grinned at the thought of Leo's perplexed smile and the little head shake he would have gotten from Donnie. He could see Mikey's mounting excitement at the thought of a fight. Mikey enjoyed fighting almost as much as he did, though with obvious different motives. Still, his younger brother had his back, was his wingman, always right at his shoulder whenever they charged into a battle.

A thread of harsh laughter slithered through the back of his mind, followed by the sharp smack of wood on flesh. He frowned at that.

His stomach gave a treacherous roar.

"Ah, shuddap," he grumbled. "No one asked ya."

The door blasted open and bounced off the wall. Raph looked up as eight Foot soldiers flooded into a space not meant for three. Rough hands caught his arms and shoulders and he was hauled off the mattress. The tip of his tail got caught between the rim of his shell and the floor and white-hot numbness shot down his legs.

He let out a painful bellow which, thankfully, resembled enough rage to send a few men backing up. But Raphael couldn't stop himself from being half dragged and half carried out of his cell. More soldiers were waiting to descend on him in the hall. Glaring through their legs, he spotted a monitering station set just beside his door. A pale, wide-eyed kid was in the seat watching him struggle with a horrified fascination.

Raph bared his teeth and hoped the brat pissed himself.

Though he was taken down the hall, he swore to make it a trip none of them would want to repeat. Men bounced from wall to wall and went down with him each time he lost his footing. And each were treated to the vast expanse of Raphael's vocabulary. He twisted and writhed and dug his heels into the linoleum, using every opportunity to search for anything that resembled an escape. Unfortunately, there wasn't a green exit sign to be had.

Wasn't that handy in a fire emergency?

Together, turtle and soldiers barrelled through a set of double doors. Raph was shoved forward and managed to gain both his feet and a nasty pull from his bandaged leg. He spun just as one of them slid a pass card through a slot beside the doors. He swore he felt the locks click into place. Huffing and dusting himself off, he turned to face the room.

"Whoa."

It was an open space two stories high and the length of a basketball court. Sunlight filtered through narrow windows near the ceiling. Heavy mats were spread across the floor and he was surprised to find how much they reminded him of home. The feeling was overwhelmed, however, by the hundreds of Foot ninja filling the arena and lining the second story railing.

Raphael looked around at them and snorted. He raised his hand. "Don' tell me. Somebody's gettin' their bar miztvah, righ'?" They

stared down at him, stonily, and his grin withered. "Fine. If Mikey had said it, ya'd all be on the ground, but whateva..."

"Are you ready for your next punishment, Raphael?"

His gaze cut to the center of the open space. Karai stood in her Foot uniform with the hilt of her katana jutting above her shoulder. She held another folder, this one several times the size of Mikey's. She flipped through the contents as she walked towards him.

"I have received a troubling report, Raphael." She closed it and held it to her chest. "You've been starving yourself."

He planted his feet and crossed his arms. "No offense ta yer cookin' skills, girly, but I'm allergic to arsenic."

"Leonardo's paranoia is catching, I see," she said mildly. "But you should know that without your full strength, you won't survive the advanced levels of Donatello's treatment."

"Oh, pass the gruel in that case." He clicked his tongue. "'Sides, I can take anythin' afta four lousy days."

"You think so?" Karai tipped her head, curiously. "Well, until you decide that you want to live and start eating again, Donatello's judgement must be postponed. Your own as well, for that matter. So, tonight we will move on to Leonardo."

"Aw, hell," Raph rolled his eyes at the soldier. "Somebody get a violin, it's about ta get tragic in here."

Karai handed the folder to one of her minions and pulled her katana free. She glanced, pointedly, behind him and Raph turned just in time to catch a pair of swords thrown to him. He shot a glare to the woman. "What's this?"

"Leonardo Hamato is the worst of your wretched kind. He is a vile traitor, a murderer, a liar, an aid to my enemies, and he desecrated

the shrine to my father's memory. I will return his cruelty back to him physically."

Raph's chest rumbled. "The worst of us? What happened ta us all bein' equal?"

She smirked and shook her head. "Perhaps I exaggerated a bit in Leonardo's case. Come, Raphael, impress me." She fell into a defensive pose.

His eyes narrowed and he lifted the blades each by a finger. "Gimme a pair of sais and see what I can do, girly."

"Surely, the rat had sense enough to teach you how to wield more than one weapon?" Anger flashed across his face before he could stop it and Karai shrugged. "This is Leonardo's punishment. Therefore, you will fight with his choice of weaponry."

She paused as he glanced the swords over, distrustful. He drew back, slowly twisting the hilts beneath his palms. The blades which were so dear to his brother had always felt encumbersome to him. Not nearly as quick and effective as his sais. It felt like he was wearing someone else's shoes. He could manage with them, but it would be uncomfortable and foreign.

Karai and the soldiers watched him for a second. Then she laughed. "I thought you would have jumped at a chance to prove yourself a better warrior than your leader. To throw a victory back into his cruel face, perhaps?"

Raph's head snapped up. "Leo ain't cruel. You got him pegged wrong. And I ain't fightin' fer a lie."

A soft murmur went up around them but Karai only looked delighted. Then she charged. Raph crossed his blade, instintively, and met her attack. Metal squealed against metal as her sword descended along his. They locked at the hilts and the turtle glared down into the vivid eyes of the woman.

"How interesting that you, of all people, would defend Leonardo's integrity. Considering the role he's fit you into, I assumed you'd agree with me. Hmm, it seems he has you better trained than even I believed."

A hot rush of indignation rushed down his spine. It was only by the thinnest thread of self-restraint that he did not rebuke her words. *Leo* had *him* trained? Anywhere else in the world, the suggestion would have pitched him into a fit of laughter. One he would have hoped Leo saw. She was right on that point. Back home, Raph would have been the first to take a dig at his brother's character.

But not here. Here, with the hatred of his enemies burning his skin, everything was different. Leonardo was different, more so than even himself, or Mikey, or Don. They were disliked, feared, and held with contempt. But his big brother...he was despised. He was the leader of their band, the head of the serpent in the Foot's view. He was the one who barked the orders that got their comrades killed. He took down the Shredder. He mocked Karai with his very survival. He ensured their missions failed and made their lives miserable. To those around him, the Leonardo with the rare killer laugh, the admirable skill in the dojo and the one person who could burn water in the kitchen didn't exist. To them, he wasn't even Leo. He was the merciless, cold-hearted "Blue One".

Nausea rocked through him at the revelation.

He shook his head and pushed back, throwing the blades upward. Karai disentangled her sword and danced out of range. Raph rose to his full height, trembling with anger. No, he wouldn't let himself see Leo in that light. Raph could fault his brother all day and night with his own judgements. But out here in the real world? Yeah, Leo was different out here, and so was he. No one, *no one* disrespected his leader out here. His lip curled back into a snarl a second before he charged himself.

The sting of impact sprang up his arms as his strike clashed with hers. Karai stained against him and managed to angle the weapons

aside so they were face-to-face.

"There you are, Raphael. So eager to fall into line with Leonardo's plan. His predictable little soldier."

He swung a kick at her, which wad barely dodged, and blocked her counterattack. His shoulders shook.

"Why do you suppose he's never tamed you?" she whispered. Raph's fierce eyes cut into her. "Your defiance cannot be that resilient. In time, you'll see that rebellion will buckle beneath constant pressure."

His teeth flashed. They broke apart and fell into a furious round of strikes and blows.

When Raphael's feet finally paused again, he was startled to find himself panting. He swayed where he stood and a wave of uneasiness rolled through him at the growing pain in his gut. He shouldn't be winded after such a minor fight. A dry, gritty ache coated the roof of his mouth and throat.

Karai spun to him and the glint of her sword caught his eye. "If your brother saw it prudent enough to save you from yourself, he would have done so long ago. He could stiftle that rage if he chose to. But you are more useful as you are, wouldn't you agree? Oh, do not growl at me, Raphael. You know the truth."

His sneer dimmed even as the fury in his eyes churned into an inferno. "Ya don' know a thing about my brutha, lady."

"Don't I?" She spun into him and attacked in a relentless flurry. Raph was pushed back and back. He flung one of the katana aside and threw all his strength behind the other. There was a wild movement to his side as Foot soldiers threw themselves out of the blade's path. The crowd finally broke in on their fight. The men were cheering their own leader on, creating a drone which beat against his temples. It was indistinct and garbled and impossible to drown out now. His own

panting scraped against his ears. That sound frightened him more than any insult rained down upon him.

"Let me tell you something about your sibling," Karai said, retreating to circle him as he struggled to keep from sounding like a winded bull. "He's a brilliant strategist. He is also cold enough to assess the strengths and weaknesses of his warriors. And he does have a role for your, Raphael. One you play out to perfection."

His grip tightened around the sword's hilt. He longed for familiar steel between his fingers.

"You are the one he can unleash. Sure, he makes attempts to stop you from merely barging into battle, but have you ever considered how weak those attempts are? If he wanted to rein you in, believe me, he would. But that would be counterproductive, would it not?"

Dammit, why wouldn't his lungs stop hurting? "Maybe...maybe Leo ain't the dictator yer nutso dad was..."

"Perhaps." She tiltered her head as if conceding. "Or perhaps he sees you as expendable." She pressed forward, touching their blades together only to allow him a barrier between them. "You are the sacrificial pawn should his plan go awry. If you live, you still have uses. If you die, well, sometimes the pawns die. Leonardo is not so objective as I. When it comes down to it, you are easier to forfeit over Donatello or Michelangelo, aren't you?"

"I'd give myself up for any of them first!"

"So he'd have you believe."

Raph let out a roar and drove himself forward. She calmly blocked each blow, which were quickly losing finesse and became more of a desperate hacking. The men were still howling and fueled his feverish mind to ignore the protest of his weakening limbs. Karai kept her composure, only giving him a slight smile when their eyes met. When his arm finally gave and paused against his will, she retaliated.

The toe of her boot caught him in the narrow gap between his carapace and plastron. Pain lanced between his ribs and into his empty gut. Raphael caught himself on his elbow. His feet scrabbled wildly to get him up again. Air chugged through clenched teeth and he stared down at the trembling arm which kept him half-propped.

The ninjas went insane with laughter, pointing and jeering at their fallen enemy. The one who held the most terror for all of them was defeated at their feet. A hollow, wracking cough tore up his parched throat and saliva flooded into his mouth. This couldn't be happening. He could take her. He could tear her apart if he wanted...he just...son of a...he couldn't get up.

He shivered as the tip of a sword lightly traced the curve of his shell. "You are not the fighter Leonardo is. I am not impressed, Raphael."

Looking up from beneath his brow, he whispered, hoarsely. "What're ya...doin', Karai? Tryin' ta...ta sic me afta Leo? Turn me a...against him?" He dropped his head. "Take more'n...this..."

Her voice filled with apalled innocence. "Of course not, Raphael. I was only making conversation. Just an outsider's observations, nothing more. Why do you ask?"

He sneered at the floor. He hated her. Everything about her. Her voice, her smile, that smugness in her face. Hate, hate, hate.

Raphael flinched as her fingers slid along his jaw and hooked beneath his chin. She lifted his head until their gazes locked. Her eyes narrowed, coldly and she leaned towards him. "The next time you are given food, take it, fool." She released him as if disgusted and gracefully rose to turn away. "Take him back to his room."

Twelve fresh soldiers were on him before he could try to rise.

Not that he tried to rise.

* Eeee, the end result of this convo is coming up next chapter! Your thoughts, please?

Conversing With A Mirror

Disclaimer : TMNT don't belong to me.

A/N: Leo's Confession…I sat down to do the final touches to the original and the scene caught me in a head lock and kept me there for three days! The original was just a bit too melodramatic and I kinda wanted to slap him by the end of it. So…hopefully, Leo's not totally OOC and wangsty. You'll let me know, yes?

Also, since Vacant Houses is busy pushing Don over to the dark side in Shadowpuppet, here's my retaliatory chapter where Raph is concerned! It's a small move back, but the pieces are moving into position!

Thank you everyone, for your reviews and critiques…they keep the words flowing!

Conversing With a Mirror

Only a second passed before Splinter answered the question offered by his eldest. But in that second lay enough time for concern to touch the father's heart. It allowed Leo to reign in his composure and swipe his tears aside. And it granted Mikey and Don, who were both lying on their stomachs and peering down through the upstairs railing, a chance to trade worried glances.

"Father," Leo had said, "can I tell you something awful?"

Splinter drew back. "You know you may tell me anything."

Doubt flickered across Leo's face. He ran his knuckles against his palm. "Donnie was right that night, sensei. He told you what happened?"

"No, Leonardo. He has not spoken to me of it."

Donnie grimaced and eased back an inch as Leo looked up in surprise. "Oh. Um, well…" He cleared his throat. "He...he and I said a lot of things that night. Um, but then he asked me why I hadn't done more to find Raph. He said I was acting like I didn't care anymore and…and that's when I hit him." He pressed his palms together. "That's why I left when I did…and…"

"That is why you went to Karai in the manner you chose?"

Leo nodded. "The night she took him…it was like something tore inside. Everything I had ever prepared for to make sure this never happened to one of them, it was all knocked out my hands. He was gone and I wasn't even there to fight for him. I couldn't do anything to help him. I didn't have a say. All my planning was irrelevant in that moment. I didn't know how to take that. And it got so that every night we came back empty-handed…" He gave a tired scoff. "I'd tell myself it was okay, because we would find him tomorrow. Everything would be fine because it was Raph and…and Karai couldn't break Raph." He glanced aside in disbelief. "I said it was okay..."

Splinter went still.

"But I think Donnie woke me up. Broke through that denial. Tonight, I thought I was prepared again. I had a plan and I had steeled myself against every possible outcome. I was ready to face any injury, or sickness, or even the thought that I might have to carry his..." Bitterness twisted his features. "But I wasn't ready for this. Not what happened tonight with Don and Mike, not what he's said to you, and not what I witnessed in that warehouse. And I can't get it out of my head that I let it happen. Don was right. I didn't do anything. I didn't go after her sooner. She was destroying him and I was telling myself it was okay!" He snarled and made a move to get up, but after a look around the room he sank back down.

"Leonardo," Splinter said quietly. "There is only one whose choices have dealt us this blow. Karai attempted to smother your brother's fire, but she failed to extinguish it completely. What we have seen thus far has proven this. He is still with us, he just requires a little

more help to fully return. He needs you, my son, he is going to need us all come morning. And he does not need you to drown yourself beneath unfounded guilt. Do you hear me?"

Leo sniffed and nodded, gathering up Raph's mask as Splinter rose. The rat's ears quivered and he looked up sharply just as two shadows whisked out of sight and two doors slipped shut. Shaking his head, Splinter returned his attention to his oldest as Leo straightened and gave his master a bow. His thin fingers took his warrior's shoulder.

"Rest, Leonardo. Our fight is not yet over."

Six am found the leader lying on his side, shifting his eyes from the red mask folded upon his night stand to alarm clock which sat next to it. Even in exhaustion, his internal clock had jarred him awake at five. Splinter had ordered him to sleep in and then to meditate on the things he had confessed, but Leo had remained on his side, thinking of the previous night and the emptiness that had radiated out of Raph's dull eyes. The same emptiness which filled his stomach. He couldn't shake that look, no matter how hard he tried to clear his mind. It just kept slipping before him and slicing him with raw helplessness.

He swallowed past a thick tongue and sighed into his pillow. He was so thirsty. Not surprising considering he'd spent most of the night weeping like a child. He gave an embarrassed growl and threw back his blankets. He headed for his door, berating himself for wasting an hour when he had orders to carry through. All he needed was a glass of water and then he could prepare for what they might face once Raphael woke up.

Leo eased down the hall and smiled when he noticed Donatello's dark computer monitor set snugly against the wall. "Way to dodge temptation, Donnie," he chuckled as he slipped past his brothers' rooms. He turned down the stairs and froze with his hand on the rail.

Orange light was wavering from the dojo.

Frowning, Leo descended and headed for the training room, fully intent on talking Mikey or Don into getting a few more hours of sleep. Cold shock bolted through his gut when he peeked inside and found Raphael framed against the candlelight.

His brother was standing with his shoulders wide and moving slowly and shakily through one of the easier katas. One they had all mastered years before. His knees bounced with the effort to keep himself steady and his upper body shivered for balance. Leo watched as he stumbled out of position and let out an annoyed huff. Raph scowled at the floor, shook his head, and headed for the weapons storage.

What was he doing up? Had Splinter fallen asleep? How long had been doing this? Had he hurt himself already trying to do more than he could manage? Leo opened his mouth to call for him, but the words died on his tongue as Raphael reemerged with two glints of steel in his hands.

Leonardo's practice katanas.

Raphael set himself into a starting pose and began to move again. His eyes were narrowed with ferocity as he brought the blades around with a faint hiss. His gestures were executed with an odd sort of broken fluidity. When shifting his weight, his ankles wobbled, threateningly, yet he did not fall. Leo stared at the flow of his own familiar kata and wondered at the precision, however unsteady, as Raph worked himself through it.

Raph dropped down too fast near the end, extended a leg too far, and buckled. He hit his hip with a grunt and Leo took an inadvertent step forward. But he stopped as Raph shoved himself back up and sliced at the air, angrily.

"Rrrah! Not good enough!" he hissed.

Leo blinked and ice coated down his spine. He knew the sounds his brothers made no matter what mood they were in. He knew the contemplative hum Donnie made when he could not solve a problem. The soft huff Mikey gave when he was disappointed. And the plenitude of noises Raphael offered up when Splinter was too near and he was not allowed to curse.

But the sharp, disgusted snarl Raph had just given?

That was Leo's own.

Raph thought he was Michelangelo earlier.

Oh, no…

Leo turned and tip-toed back towards the living room. Why was he the one who had to find his brother like this? Why had his master let him slip past him? How would Raph react if he came face to face with the guy he was impersonating? What would he do if -

"Hey!"

The leader clenched his teeth and automatically cursed turtle luck. He looked over his shoulder. Raph stood before the flickering wall. Leo's eyes cut down to his own meditation mat and the candles which provided the dim light. He frowned to see the sweater he had worn lying beside them. But his attention returned to his brother as Raph took a few steps forward.

Leo dipped his chin. "H-hey."

Raph's brow fell low as he drew closer, taking tender steps though his face was hard with suspicion. "How did you get in here? How did you get by our security?"

Leo blinked at that. "What? No, I-I was…"

"Wait," Raphael stopped a foot away and lifted his chin, thoughtfully. "I know you…You were at the place where I was being held. You

were at Karai's."

The leader gawked at him. "Of course you know me. You…we spoke tonight. Earlier, in the lab."

Raph cocked his head, dismissively. "You convinced Karai to let us go."

His words were slow and carefully pronounced for authority. Leo gave him a weak grin. "Yeah, that was me."

"Why?"

"Pardon?"

A blade came up, directed at his chest. "Why would you help my brothers and I? Who are we to you?"

Leo stared, wondering just what his brother was seeing. He lifted empty hands. "I…I just wanted to help."

"And just how did you manage our release?"

"I asked."

The sword fell between them. "You asked?"

Leo felt a ghostly ring of cold gun barrel pressed against his temple and smiled. "There was some negotiating, but yes."

"You went into Foot Headquarters and *asked* Karai to let us go?"

"It was her office, actually."

Raph's gold eyes widened. "You…?" He threw back his head with a sharp laugh. "See? That's the kind of ridiculous thing one does when they don't *plan* . Asking Karai…at her *office* ? Ha! That's tha the stupidest thing I eva heard!"

Leo straightened as Raph's own gruffness took over. His brother didn't seem to notice, though, as he tucked one of the swords between his arm and side. "However, I suppose I owe you my life." He extended his hand. "I'm Leonardo."

Slowly, Leo took his hand and received Raph's fierce, one pump shake. The grip was the same, but the cool over-confidence which filled his face was eerie. Leo broke the connection and retreated a step. "Uh, s-so how…hmm, how are you now?"

Raphael looked miffed and let out a low scoff. "As well as can be expected. But we'll pull through. We always do." He retrieved the sword and examined the blade. "Mikey didn't have it so bad…and Don is a little shaken, but fine. We'll survive."

"What about Raph?"

Fierce gold eyes snapped to him with an annoyed click of the tongue. Leo swallowed thickly and pushed on. "Is Raphael okay?"

Raph's head tipped back and a sudden icy resolve filled his face. "Don't concern yourself with him, friend. Raph's a lost cause." He lifted an indifferent shoulder.

Leo's heart sped up. "That's not true…"

"Oh, I think it is. Raph made a promise he couldn't keep. Too bad for him."

"A promise?"

Raphael nodded. "He said he wouldn't break. He said he could take it, but he lied to me. He cracked and let her in. He let *me* down."

Leo shook his head. "No…I…I don't believe you. It's not…"

"Really?" Arrogance curved the darker turtle's mouth. "Have you seen him recently?"

"I want to," Leo whispered, firmly, ignoring the patronizing smile which didn't belong on Raph's face.

That grin deepened and Leo's hand tightened into a fist. He blinked as a sudden thought struck him. Was this how Raph saw him? As a pompous, cold-hearted ass? Raph lifted his chin with a superior smirk and leaned in as if passing a secret.

"Tell you what, friend, feel free to chat with my brother." An wicked gleam filled his face. "If you can *find* him. He's buried deep now, you know."

Leo's eyes hardened, stubbornly. He lifted his lip. "Just give me the chance."

Raph grinned and snorted a laugh across the leader's face. "You have fun with that. If you'll excuse me, I have to leave for a while."

Panic cut through Leo's anger. "Where are you -?"

"I am going to a friend's. I want to let her know that we have returned."

Leo darted around him and blocked the door, gaining himself an angry scowl. "You are supposed to be resting!" Raph's brow quirked and Leo reigned in the frantic edge to his voice. "Master Splinter's orders. There's no need for you to leave. I was about to call April and Casey myself. But I'm sure they'll be happy to come down for a visit. April's been worried sick -"

"No! She can't come here!"

Leo jerked back. "What? Why?"

"I won't let her down here, do you hear me? I won't put her through it. She won't be afraid of him anymore."

"Afraid?" Leo whispered. "Of what?"

Raph cocked his head as if the other were being stupid on purpose. "Take a guess. Raphael's not getting within a mile of her. I won't see that fear in her eyes! I won't put her in danger, do you understand?"

"No, I don't!" Leo cried. He caught Raph's arm as he tried to pass. "What the hell is your problem?"

His larger brother spun and jammed his hand against Leo's chest, stopping him short. He was pale and shaky and beads of sweat lined the curve of his forehead as he gently panted. Suspicion rose in his eyes again and he pushed Leo back. "Look, I appreciate all you've done for us…Though," he hummed with amusement, "given enough time, I'm sure we could have freed ourselves." Geez, he was like talking to a wall, Leo thought. A nasty, self-righteous, frigid wall. "I have things I must deal with now. So, I hope you don't mind seeing yourself to the door?"

He stepped back and gave a short, formal bow. Leo's beak wrinkled in frustration. When his brother rose and gave him a warning look, he sighed and returned the gesture. He did a mental eye roll and raced through his options of how to restrain him from leaving…

Steel rang off stone and Raph's suddenly free hand clamped onto his shoulder. Leo looked up in surprise and found Raph was not looking at him, but beyond his arm.

"What is it?"

The emerald chin jerked to the side and his thick hand slid past Leo's shoulder. His fingers traced down to the sharp, jagged edge of Leo's damaged shell. He drew back with a hiss like he'd been burned. Leo's heart sank as Raph threw his hand over his own shoulder and ran it down the intact lip of his carapace. Golden eyes widened.

Oh, no.

Leonardo leaped back just as the remaining blade in his brother's hand shot up between them. "How…how did you…who the hell are you?" Raph hissed between clenched teeth.

"Hey…"

"W-where's my…I don' unda…" Raph shook his head, fiercely. "No… no, I'm just…" He looked up, wildly, terror filling his face. "No…"

Leo reached a placating hand towards him and Raph slapped it away. He panted and locked eyes with the leader. Slow recognition crept into his face and was followed immediately by denial. Raph snapped his eyes shut and shook his head again. "No…no, no, no… where…the anchor…where's the anchor, Mikey?"

"Raph?" Leo whispered.

He twitched at the name and sank down, breathing heavily.

"Raph, open your eyes, bud." Leo knelt before him and took his shoulders. The eyelids squeezed tighter. "Let me see you."

Gold appeared, glassy and empty of everything but fear. A chill rolled over the eldest's skin. Slowly, Raph turned his head until he was staring warily at his brother. Leo smiled and nodded. Raph's face fell relaxed and innocent.

"LEO!"

Both started as Donatello came barreling into the dojo, his eyes huge. "I just checked Raph's room! Leo, he's…" He came up short and squeaked as Raph's gaze fell on him. "Oh, you found him…"

Leo felt the tension bolt through Raph's shoulders and jumped to his feet a second ahead of his brother, blocking him and catching the wrist which bore the sword. Raph let out a furious hiss and glared at the leader. "You're in *league* with *him* ?"

"Of course I am! It's Donnie! He's your brother!"

That arrogance returned with a wicked snarl. "Fool! That's not Donnie! He's got two faces, can't you see it? He'll kill us all!"

"Raph…" Donnie whispered.

Contempt was thrown his direction. "He doesn't even *know* who I am! That is not my brother! Get out! You're not welcome here!"

"No!" Leo shouted, pushing him back. He threw a hand out to his younger sibling. "Don't listen to him, Donnie. He doesn't mean it. And *Leo* ," he spat to Raph. "This is Donatello. This is his rightful place. You will not order him from this home."

Disbelief filled the second eldest's face. He threw his sword aside and stepped up into Leo's face. "I'm sorry, are you giving *me* a command?"

"You bet your ass I am," Leo whispered, dangerously.

Don looked between them, nervous.

Raph's sneer lessened and he stepped back with a slight shake of his head. He glanced down to his own hands and trembling fingers. He closed them into fists and let out his scoff again. "Heh. If you're willing to die, I won't stop you, friend." He pushed past Leo and glared down at Donnie. "You. If you come near any of my family, or *my* Donnie," he leaned down and tapped his finger off Don's plastron, "I'll kill you myself. Got it?"

Light brown eyes huge with confusion, Donnie nodded.

"Fantastic." Raph hissed. He shot a withering look to Leo and stiffly walked across the living room to the stairs. Both brothers watched him cross down the hall and Leo's bedroom door slammed with a deafening crack.

Leo glanced to his brother, who was shaking and holding his hand over his mouth. "Donnie?"

"Leo, what just happened here?"

Splinter exited from Raph's room, looking worried and startled out of sleep. "My sons? Have you seen…" He sighed as Don and Leo nodded and leaned against the railing, closing his eyes wearily. Don started for the stairs, but Leo's hand caught him around the bicep. He glanced back with a frown.

"Donnie," Leo whispered. "I know you're the one we always turn to when it comes to medical things. But we have to know what she did to him and I just...I think it's time we called in some reinforcement."

Donatello looked upstairs and gave a sharp nod. "I'll call him."

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* Knight to E4, Vacant! (Or a valid chess move…?) Raph's living with the Foot's evil version of Leo in his head!

** Reviews, thoughts, and anything that come to mind are always appreciated! Thanks, everyone!

Helluva Bass

Disclaimer : TMNT are the property of Eastman, Laird, and Nickelodeon

A/N : Back to poor Raphie…

Helluva Bass

It might have been prudent in the beginning to have started a calendar of some sort. But, as Raphael had lost the number of days it had been since the fight with Karai, he didn't really see much point in it. And with each alternating punishment and meal that passed without rescue, he was glad he didn't have a growing field of tally marks to stare at..

The porridge which was brought to him twice a day was far from filling and fought him tooth and nail. But it went down. Subsequently, his trips back into the arena became far more bearable. Though he hadn't seen Karai since, there was no shortage of Foot willing to strike a few blows to their enemy. The fights were inane and brutal, lasting until sheer numbers and exhaustion won out. Meant to whittle away the pride which demanded a performance he could not fully execute.

Raph scowled at the thought, stirring his daily meal and eyeing a dark bruise spreading over his knee. His pads and belt had been cut away a few days ago; he supposed the intent was too make him feel exposed and vulnerable. Humans were obsessive about how they were covered. He just hated that the method worked.

He licked a raw scrape on his knuckles, made a face, and shoveled in the last spoonful of sludge. His throat convulsed so he tossed his nose upward, breathing deep until it decided to stay put.

"Yeesh," he growled, grabbing the water bottle. He glared at the camera and lifted the empty bowl. "Ya ain't got any salt for this crap?" The bowl rang off the cell door and went wavering to a stop across the room.

The red recording light blinked on.

Raph snorted and dropped the spoon over the side of the bed. He flopped onto the wobbly springs, one hand hooking behind his head, the other propping the water in the center of his chest plates. He glared up at the bare bulb until a familiar beat of boredom tugged at his eyes. His vision wavered, darkened along the edges, and he dropped his chin.

Weird, he usually stayed awake longer than this. He could run Die Hard through his head at least half-way before nodding off. His muscles relaxed into the tattered sheets. A content little sigh slid through his nose.

Then, trickling from behind his left ear, there was a whisper. **You should be training…**

He huffed. "Can it, Fearless. I'll do it later."

Whatever you say, Raph , came a patient reply.

The bottle toppled and doused his face and neck. He sputtered and sat up, looking around, blearily. "Leo? Donnie?" The tiny space stared back at him. Raph scooted back so he was sitting against the wall and pressed the heel of his palm over his brow. "Great. I'm goin' looney in this…" His legs were blurry. "Dump…"

The next conscious thought came when a gloved hand waved before his face. His eyes flicked up to a pair of Foot soldiers standing beside him. A leery taser was aimed at his face.

"I didn' hear a knock…"

One of the men straightened. "Are you going to play nice tonight?"

Raph's hazy eyes rolled to follow him and he suddenly spat out a giggle. He braced himself on his palms and dropped his head between his shoulders. The bed shook with his laughter. "I'm…I'm Raphael. I got an…attitude problem! I don't play well with…others." The last word came in a weak squeak before he buckled forward, catching his elbows on his knees and crowing at the floor.

He wasn't entirely sure why it was so funny…and hell if he didn't care.

The soldiers stood above him, stonily. One swore. "The doc used too much."

"She is not going to appreciate this," the other sighed. He reached forward and jabbed a finger into the solid muscle and sinew of the turtle's shoulder. A listless swat missed his hand completely. "Hey, you! Can you walk?"

Raph lunged to his feet, indignantly. "Pfffsh, can I walk? Do I *look* like a guy who can'…" He paused, staring between their heads. The first man nervously followed his gaze to the empty hall. His friend shoved him aside as Raphael toppled forward. The turtle's hands were useless at his sides as he smacked his face and chest off the cement.

The men looked at one another as a loud snore rumbled from the warrior.

In one sweep, the papers were gathered and slipped into a folder. Karai eased her notes into a sleek briefcase and looked into the two screens on the desk. Her associates were mirroring her actions.

"Gentlemen, as always, it has been a pleasure."

A jovial, tanned face on the left grinned. "Stay warm out there, y'hear, Miss Saki?"

"We're still on schedule for the conference in Denver, correct?" the other said.

"Of course, Mr. Jackson, all the arrangements have been made. Mr. Oritz…thank you for the concern. Until our next meeting?"

Jackson gave a curt nod and the screen went black. The elderly man leaned forward to close his computer and gave her a wink. "Take care of yourself, darlin'. You should get out of that office. Young lady like you shouldn' be stuck at work on a Friday nigh'."

Karai gave him a modest smile. "Actually, Mr. Oritz, I do have plans for this evening."

"Ah! Tha's what I like to hear, Miss Saki! Have some fun."

"Good night, Samuel." She flicked off her web cam and slipped into her jacket. Descending to the first floor, she passed the receptionist's desk with a sharp nod and swept out into the night. An icy November wind lashed at her hair. Her driver, with shoulder hunched against the onslaught, stepped forward to shield her as she slid into the car.

She smoothed her hair back and glanced to a silent figure. "The transport?"

The Foot bobbed his head, respectfully. "No incidents, Mistress. The creature remained unconscious through the duration of the move."

"And the other three?"

"They arrived at the warehouse two hours after our departure."

Karai shook her head with a mirthless laugh. "Donatello is a clever beast, there is no denying. I want constant surveillance on our computers. The slightest anomaly is to be reported. Leonardo cannot come so close again."

"Yes, Mistress."

She looked out into the night, scornfully, and they rode in silence. Traffice fell behind them and disappeared as they eased into a division where the building were dark and the civilians questionable. When the car parked, both the driver and soldier took a position at Karai's sides as she trotted up the steps of Raphael's new home.

A technician met them at the second story. "This way, madam." He led them into the depths of the building. Karai pulled a folder from her briefcase and dismissed the driver to take the case and her coat back to the car. Nodding to the technician, she and the Foot followed him into the room where Raphael had been taken.

He had been strapped down again, though he was upright on a lightly padded table. His wrists and ankles were shackled and broad, leather strap buckled his chest. The turtle looked up at the sharp pock-pock of her heels.

His pupils were huge and unfocused and he beamed from ear to ear. Karai's steps stuttered at the sight of it. The difference was astounding. The hardened warrior was stripped aside, revealing a younger soul. A pair of cords danced off his cheeks, running from the suctioned diodes at his temples. They connected just above his plastron and ran off to the side, ending at a squat, blue machine beside him. A generator…well, what had originally been a generator and had been given a severe make-over. It was to this machine that the technician went without a look at the prisoner.

Karai went before Raphael and he leaned forward, his glassy eyes gleaming. "Know what Mikey said? H-he said…" His voice shifted surprisingly light, "He said, 'This Ipod's gotta helluva bass!'" A heavy laugh blasted the air. "True, right?"

She looked to the technician. "Michelangelo?"

"Audio hallucination." He shrugged. "Dr. Chaplin said it might be a side effect to the water."

She smiled. "Then let us clear the fog, Mr. Davis." The technician hesitated and then flipped the switch. Raphael's laughter died instantly.

His eyes widened, knees snapping straight as his neck strained back. His fingers jerked and tightened into claws rather than fists. Sound could not slip beyond clamped jaws, but the jolt of pain and surprise could not be hidden in his irises. The machine went silent and Raphael collapsed against his restraints.

Short, wet breaths passed through his teeth and his nostrils flared. Karai gave him a gentle smile and stepped so he had to look at her. "How nice to see you *do* possess the ability to smile, Raphael."

Shock melted into a scowl. "Yer…frickin'…druggin'…"

"That's obvious, isn't it?"

"Cheat'a…" His voice rumbled low. "Ya cheated…in'na fight."

She stepped back, resting a finger across her lips, thoughtfully. "Is it considered cheating to level the playing field when pitted against a powerful opponent? Even with your little fast, Raphael, I could not have overpowered you. So yes, you were given a sedative to slow your reactions. But, really, is it so different from breaking the arm or leg of an enemy? I gave myself an edge, you just failed to rise to the challenge."

"Yeah...yeah, tha's called cheatin'…"

"Well, perhaps you'd find me more contrite had it been a matter of honor." Her long fingers reached to lightly rest on his shoulder. "But prisoners aren't extended such luxuries such as *honor* , are they?"

He snarled, his eyes darkening with wrath. She pushed away and opened her folder. "So, if you are finished with the complaints -"

"Yer food sucks, too. Ya gonna drug me, at least spike a frickin' steak or somethin'."

She ignored him and calmly cleared her throat. "We will begin Donatello's punishment. You've gotten a taste of it, already, but you'll want to hear the charges, yes?" She looked up into disdain. "Good. The crimes inflicted upon the Foot by Donatello Hamato include network hacking, espionage, arson, and the total destruction of my master's original stronghold."

"All that for li'l Don - rragh!" The machine buzzed as it kicked to life again, clattered for a moment, and fell still. Raph shook himself and glared at the pale technician. "I didn' hear…'er say *go* , jackass…"

"Electroshock for the electrician," Karai continued. She cocked her head. "Did it sting?"

"Nah, tickles," he spat. "Like gettin'…a kiss from Klunk."

Her head tipped. "Who is Klunk, Raphael?"

He looked up, sharply biting his tongue. Karai grinned as his cheeks darkened. "Don't worry, I'm sure the drugs are weakening some of your defenses. Something to watch for, though, you wouldn't want to slip on something important…something that would put your family at risk."

"Kiss my green, hairless -" His jaw slammed upwards as he smacked the back of his head off the table.

She waited until he hung panting a moment later. "How are your thoughts these days, Raphael? You've been my guest for over three weeks now." Surprise threaded across his pupils before vanishing behind loathing. "I was just curious if the unfairness of the situation has been fully realized. It's such a pity to see you like this. If life were fair, I would have four prisoners and it would Donatello standing there in your stead. I suppose it would only be natural for survival's

sake, that you would begin to wish this fate to have fallen on Leonardo instead. Or Michel -"

"Go ta hell," he spat a second before the bolt rocked through him again.

She lifted her shoulders. " *I* don't think I will."

His shoulders bounced with the current still burning his veins. "What'ya…want, girlie? An apology? Fer *Shredder* ? Y'ain't gonna get it…"

He blinked when her laughter broke the air. The technician and soldier exchanged a look. Karai's voice fell and she dabbed a finger at the corner of her eye. "Oh, Raphael, you astound me. I don't believe that black heart of yours could fester enough guilt to warrant an apology. Not one forged of sincerity, that is."

Her hand lashed out and caught the rubber cord on his chest. His head was jerked down. The bare wires at his temples dug into scorched flesh and he hissed. When his eyes fluttered open again, he met her sneer. "And even if you could, I'd shove it back down your throat. An *animal's* apology changes nothing. My father is still lost. I do not care if you feel the slightest remorse for your actions, Raphael." She jerked the cord again, "Or those of your brothers. What I require is a body to atone for the cruelty that Leonardo inflicted upon us. So spout hatred, swear revenege, beg for my forgiveness, your words fall upon deaf ears. There is no restitution in remorse, so you will continue to bear my judgement. Do you understand?"

His eyes seared into hers.

"Good boy." She released him and stepped back, straightening her blouse. "Again."

The generator rattled and he was thrown upright. His fisted knuckles turned white. Defined tendons and muscles in his neck lifted against

his scales. One seething eye cracked enough to glare at the woman. As she watched him writhe, serenity returned to her.

"Davis? Take him to level four."

"But Madam, you requested the process to be slow…"

" *Four* , Davis."

The dial clicked higher and the generator shifted into a deeper drone. Pain laced across the turtle's face. Karai smiled when his shoulders buckled into the table. His teeth wrenched apart.

The driver, who had retreated to wait in the street, blanched at the guttural scream that reverberated from the building.

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* So, Karai's slightly off her rocker. But what's a TMNT torture story without the electroshock? Raph's delirium is my answer to Vacant Houses' challenge.

* Your thoughts please?

The Doctor is In

Disclaimer: I don't own TMNT...or the song Danny Boy...

A/N : We're over halfway there! Hopefully, that news doesn't make you want to drop-kick me for being long winded. Ah, well, the updates continue! Thank you all for the hits, reads, and reviews! And Pinguin1993...totally called me out! Look who's found his way into the story!

The Doctor is In

"Leonardo?" The rumble of his friend's voice shook him from his reverie. He looked up, catching the glitter of eyes set against the ceiling. Leatherhead tipped his head. "You seem distracted. Are you certain about this?"

Leo shoved confidence across his face. "Of course. Are you ready?"

"I am."

The young turtle blew out a breath and reached for the handle. A flash of the ludicrousness of the situation rolled through him. He was nervous about entering his *own* bedroom. Second guessing an action he never thought about on any other day. Then again, he'd never had to go to face the ugly personification of himself on any of *those* days.

Steeling himself, he pushed past the threshold and scoured his room for Raphael. Everything seemed to be as he left it. The covers were still thrown back on his bed, several highlighted books were spread across his desk, his katanas were still sheathed and hung upon his wall, his bookcase…was slightly knocked askew.

Raphael was sitting in the tight corner, hedged in by the bookcase and Leonardo's dresser. How he had ever squeezed into the space

was unfathomable. Raph leaned against the wall, palms open on his lap as he gazed at the grain patterns in the wood.

A familiar chill swept over Leo's shoulders. He felt the tingle which had been in Raphael's cell. That feeling of damp, cold walls and air tainted by urine and sweat. He crossed to his brother and sank to his haunches. "Hey, bud…"

Raphael looked up. All trace of "Leonardo's" personality had been wiped from him. He reached for the leader's bandana and his wrist was caught by deft fingers. Leo pushed his hand down, instead pressing a cold glass into the other's palm. "You need to drink, Raph."

He looked into it, tilting the glass so the surface shimmered in the light. A small huff of defeat passed his nose and Raphael cocked his head back to down the glass in four swallows. Panting, he offered the empty cup back.

"Do you need more?"

Raph frowned, as if he couldn't even conceive the notion that *more* was an option. So he dropped his attention back to his fingers.

Leo glanced aside as Leatherhead peered over his shoulder. His friend's eyes were wide at the mellowness of the largest turtle brother. The small case he had brought along hung from loose fingers. Leo gave him a weak attempt at a reassuring smile. He looked to Raphael and gingerly reached into the space to touch his knee.

"Hey, Raph? I brought Leatherhead to see you."

Raphael lifted his eyes, took in the sight of the massive crocodile, and looked back to Leo with indifference. Leo cocked his head. "You know Leatherhead, Raph. Our friend?"

Light flickered within the blank irises. Raphael sat a little straighter and frowned. "Michelangelo?"

Leo's smile dropped at a breath which snaked between dozens of teeth. "No. No, Raph. What happened with Mikey was an accident, remember? Everything turned out to be okay."

Raph scowled at the larger mutant and drew his knees to his chest, but no further recognition seemed to ignite. Leo considered a moment and bit his lip, wondering what reaction he would receive at his next words. He eased to his knees, rolling himself closer to his brother and whispered. "Remember how he helped us with Donnie?"

Raph's face filled with fear and he pressed back into his cubby hole. His hand inched for his side and a soft whine slid through his nose. Leo caught his wrist again, softening his eyes to reassure the panic which the movement earned him.

"Not the one you're afraid of, Raph. Not the one out here. In here." He reached farther into the hole and set his palm across Raphael's chest. "Donatello. *Our* Donnie. Remember? Leatherhead brought him back. He stopped Bishop's outbreak, right?"

Slowly, the darker chin lifted and fell.

"He's going to help you too, Raph. He's going to stop what Karai did."

"D-Donatello?"

"Now you."

Raphael swallowed, thickly. His hand slid to the top of the dresser and he hauled himself up. Grating his plastron against the sharp edge of the dresser, the rear side of his shell knocked into the bookshelf and rocked it back an inch. Everything on the shelves tumbled out of order. When he stood free of his own makeshift prison, Raph looked up, almost pleadingly, to Leatherhead.

"Stop."

LH smiled, sadly, and knelt, offering his palm to the turtle. Raph gazed at it, mildly, until the deeper voice sounded with a rolling chuckle. "May I see your hand, Raphael?"

Raph looked to Leo, uneasily, and the older brother nodded. "Trust us, Raph. Nothing bad is going to happen."

The emerald arm extended, resting his wrist across the mottled, brownish green palm of the crocodile.

Michelangelo pressed his ear to the door, stuffed his finger into the other, and snorted when all he got was muffled words. He knelt and stuck his head near the doorjamb before throwing his hands up, futilely. He considered stepping inside to ask if Leo would at least enunciate for eavesdroppers, but for once discretion won out over impulsiveness.

After all, this was *Leo's* room. There wasn't a place better equipped to sever, skewer, decapitate, and/or otherwise disembowel intruders. Especially nosey intruders who interrupted the delicate process of getting a blood sample from Raphael.

It just didn't seem smart.

Movement caught his eye from downstairs. Speaking of smarts… Mikey pushed from his useless task and hunched over the railing. Donatello was circling the living room, making the same endless loop he'd started almost two hours ago. His chin was caught between his thumb and forefinger and he kept his eyes downcast until he'd traveled to a point where he could send a glare towards Leo's room. Mikey watched a few rounds and then his head perked in interest. He flipped over the railing and landed in the center of Don's path.

"Dude, seriously, you have to stop."

Donnie blinked as his steps were cut short. Annoyance filled his face. "Stop? How can I stop? I don't have a clue how to *begin* ! I have absolutely no idea how I'm supposed to treat Raphael's condition; I actually can't fully understand his condition because he can't stand the sight of me! Ergo, I can't examine him! I don't know if this is even reversible and I'm pretty sure I'm this close to losing *my* mind because of all of this! Does that sound like something I can just stop, Michelangelo?"

Mikey frowned at him, warily, and then pointed to the floor. "I actually meant that you need to stop pacing." Donnie looked between his feet. "See? You're cutting across Leo's normal worry route. If it gets all warped, he's going to end up with back problems." His brother stared at him, incredulously and Mikey raised his hands. "But hey, do you have anything you need to get off your chest?"

Don wilted and rubbed at the knot in his neck. "Sorry. I…I guess I'm just not used to sitting on the bench. And it feels like it's all I have been doing lately."

Mikey gave him a punch to the shoulder. "Welcome to the world of the sidelines, you can hang out with me. My constant nagging to be involved doesn't seem so annoying now, does it?" Donnie chuckled and shook his head. "Just watch, Don, everything is going to be okay."

"How do you know?"

The orange turtle shrugged and went to the couch, plopping onto the armrest. "I just do."

"Well, that encouraging," Donnie smirked. "Except you didn't see what happened in the -"

"I *know* what happened," Mike said a little sharply, folding his arms. "It doesn't matter. Any minute now, you or Leo are going to have the *revelation* and it's all going to turn good. We'll get Raphie back."

Don's mouth pressed into a thin line. "The revelation?"

"Oh, come on," Mike scoffed. "You know, that point where everything seemed hopeless and there's no sign of the sunrise on the horizon. That's when the forgotten detail suddenly strikes and totally saves the day. It happens in movies all the time." He lifted his brow, expectantly. "So? Start revelating."

"What happens in that head of yours?" Donnie wondered with a small smile.

"Like you could survive in here long enough to find out," Mike grinned.

"The brain's a bit more complicated than a movie. You can't just snap your fingers and make everything okay, you know."

Mikey bounced his heels off the side of the couch. "Yeah, but Don -"

The door above creaked open and Donatello all but left a dust trail as he bolted for the stairs.

Mikey blinked after his sudden abandonment and slid off the armrest. "We still gotta hope…" He sighed and caught up with his brother at the base of the stairs. Leatherhead carefully eased his bulk down the steps, followed by Leonardo.

"I'm sorry, LH," Leo said quietly.

"It is nothing," the crocodile shook his head. "It does not surprise me his first recollection of me was my attack on Michelangelo. Do not worry," he gave his gentle and terrifying smile. "My skin is rather thick."

"What happened?" Donnie asked.

"I retrieved a sample," Leatherhead said, lifting the slender glass vial. "Donatello, I wondered if you would like to assist me in analyzing it?"

Don's face lit up before suddenly clouding over. He shot a suspicious look to Leonardo, who diligently began examining a loose bolt in the railing. Mikey flicked his eyes between them as the accusation worked up Donnie's throat. The scathing question of just *who* wanted the inventor to take a break from the lair thrummed unspoken between the four of them.

It was official. Leo's skill at sneakiness was at a level zero.

Mikey stepped forward and slapped his brother on the shell, breaking Don's death glare on the eldest. "C'mon, dude. You can bring the results back to us in a brown envelope. It'll be like an episode of Maury."

Donatello blinked and seemed to draw back from his dark stewing. He looked at Mike's eager grin, over to Leo, and back. Then something deep within his eyes seemed to break. He fell back a step, nervously cupping his hand over the opposite elbow. A softness filled his face which had been absent for far too long.

"Uh, yeah. Yeah, I'd like to see what's going on…Thanks, LH."

Leatherhead smiled, relieved, and gestured for Donnie to lead the way. The scientists vanished out the front door, already trading results they might find. Leo tapped his fist off the railing. "Thanks, Mike."

"Yeah, well," Mikey shrugged, folding his arms across the uneasiness in his chest. "How you holding up?"

"Heh. I was gonna ask you that."

"That bad, huh?" Leo lifted his brow and Mikey grinned. "When you and Donnie get all tired and stuff, your grammar starts slipping."

He got a mystified smile. "What sort of things do you know?" Mikey stuck out his lip and Leo's eyes crinkled with a soft laugh. "Listen, I'm going topside to fill in April and Casey. If they get a call, they're going

to want to come down here and I don't think Raph's ready for that yet. So, do you mind taking sentry duty?"

"Me? Here? Alone? With Raph? By myself?"

"He's not a rabid dog, Mike."

Mikey nodded, anxiously. "No, yeah, I know. But…what if he wants you? What if he takes off? What if he comes down here acting like *me* ? What is he's hungry? What if…what if Karai shows up to take him back -"

Leo flicked him sharp on the beak, stopping the tirade. "That's enough of that," he said sternly. "Raph's still in my room and he's gone back into his quiet phase. Master Splinter is resting, but if anything happens, he can take over. Besides, I won't be gone more than a half hour. Odds are you won't have to worry about a thing."

Never trust the odds. It became Mikey's new motto. That, and Leonardo is a devious liar. Never trust him either.

Ten minutes after his brother had gone, Michelangelo had slumped into the couch and was clicking, rapid-fire, through the channels. How on earth is it possible that nine hundred channels couldn't offer up anything vaguely interesting to distract him? It wasn't as if he were overly picky about his viewing standards.

No, no, no, dumb, boring, no Buenos, meh, no, wait…no.

Click

The TV paused on a cooking show. Mikey stared through it as cold fear settled across his neck. He hit the mute button and slowly rotated his head towards the upstairs. He could not see Leonardo's room from this angle, but he was sure he had heard the door open. A minute later, soft footsteps moved along the hallway.

Mike was balanced on the back of the couch in a flash, rising to his toes. There, crouched before Donatello's door, was Raphael. He ran his finger along the top of the computer monitor still pressed against the bricks. He head cocked, thoughtfully, and then he spun to lock eyes with his brother.

Michelangelo fell off the couch. He scrambled around to the front and threw himself back onto the cushions, frantically flipping through the channels. His neck tingled at the sound of a heavier gait descending the stairs and passing behind him. Raphael disappeared into the bathroom without bothering to turn on the light or close the door. A moment later, after Mikey had to hum loudly to block out Raphael's answer to nature's call, the larger turtle silently crossed to Donatello's lab and trotted up the steps.

He paused to give the lopsided door a puzzled look. The top hinge had been torn free, leaving chunks of splintered wood scattered on the steps. The reminder of a fight he hadn't witnessed. Then he was gone into the dark interior of Don's sanctuary.

Mikey watched after him, twisting slick hands over the remote. He looked towards Splinter's room and back. Sighing, he tossed the remote over his shoulder and went to investigate. He peeked into the lab. Light filtered in from the living room, revealing Raphael standing before Don's computer. He gazed up at the shelves lining the wall. An open encyclopedia was in his hands.

Mikey eased into the room, absently scratching his plastron where he could still feel the outline of Raph's heel. He plastered an overly bright smile on his face. "H-hey."

Raph's knees buckled and he slammed the book shut. "Mikey," he breathed, "you scared me."

Warning bells rang between his ears. "Donnie…" he licked his lip and moved closer. "What are you looking for?"

Raph hastily shoved the book back into place. "Nothin'…I…" His eyes widened and he caught Mikey's bicep, not noticing how the muscle tightened beneath his hand. Horror filled his face. "Mikey… did *she* do this to you?"

Do? Do what? Mikey gaped at him for a moment before the dull pain above his sinuses came back to him. He'd forgotten about the bruises from his busted beak. Bruises which normally would have spurred muttered threats against whining. Instead, worry was etched across Raphael's mouth.

"Yeah," Mikey whispered, sadly searching his brother's eyes. "Yeah, Karai did this."

"Aw, Mike." Raph reached as if to touch the ugly blotches but Mikey moved back. Raph started, looked at his suspended hand, and let it fall with a sigh. "I'm sorry. I did not know that she had done this. I was not there to stop it…"

Oh, boy. He should have gotten Master Splinter first. "It's okay, D-Don. Look," he patted his chest. "All in one piece, just with a little extra character painted on." Raphael only gazed at him, mournfully. He sighed. "Seriously, what are you looking for?"

Another book was yanked down. Physics. Raph flipped to the middle of the book, looked the page over, and shoved it towards the other. "I…I don't understand. I can see the words. I can read them. I don't understand what they're trying to say. It's…" Raph rolled his hands, just as Donnie did when he'd gotten himself flustered trying to explain something and was getting zero comprehension from the other three. "Nothing is connecting in here," he touched his brow, "things that should be, Mikey. I look at this…and it's like I'm reading gibberish…"

He let out a frustrated grunt and sank into Don's chair, scrubbing at his mouth. Mikey looked at the book and felt his eyes lose focus after the first sentence. He shook his head and dropped it onto the desk.

"Look, Ra…Don, it's okay. I bet you just need to rest a little longer… and it'll all click again." *I hope* , he added to himself.

Raph snorted. "Leo's not resting…"

"Leo's crazy."

A jolt shot down his spine as Raph jerked to his feet, shoving his beak an inch from the youngest's. Familiar fire ignited across the golden eyes. "Don't say that!" Raph hissed. "Leo's good."

Mikey stared at him, trembling as adrenaline pounded in his ears. "I-I-I…didn't say he was bad..."

"He's *good* ," Raph said still with Don's softer voice. "She's lying about him, Mikey. Don't start to believe it…" he drew back, panting lightly. Mikey narrowed his eyes and slowly reached behind him to the light switch behind him. Fluorescents buzzed above them and Raph winced. Dark circles were under his eyes, too, and he looked pale and weak. A thin sheen of sweat was on his brow and he stumbled back into the seat.

"Leo's good…he's good…he's not the worst of us." Raph took a shaky breath. A shiver rocked through his shoulders. His tongue smacked when he swallowed.

"Donnie?" Mikey whispered, fearfully, dropping to his knees.

Raph studied the floor, his trembling fingers dangling between his legs. A soft chuckle radiated through his chest. Weary eyes lifted. "I am not really Donatello. You know that, right, Mike?"

His heart jumped. "Do *you* know that?"

"Of course," Raph said, "We're jes playin' the game, Mikey…"

"Raph? Raph, what are you -"

Mikey's words died in his throat as the life drained out of his brother's eyes. His face smoothed and became placid again. "The anchor is gone."

"Raph!" Mikey shook his shoulder, desperately. "What anchor? What are you talking about?"

Water gurgled through the piping above their heads and drew the older turtle's attention. A slight smile touched his mouth and to Mikey's utter shock, he became to sing low. " *Oh, Donnie-boy, the pipes, the pipes are calling…* We're drifting, Michelangelo…"

"Raphie?"

" *From glen to glen and down the mountainside…* "

Mouth dry, Mike grabbed both of his brother's shoulders and gave him a sharp shake. Raph blinked and looked past him. "Raphael! Stop. You know you're not Donnie, you just said it!"

"Michelangelo…thievery, conspiracy…"

He pushed back, stepping away from his brother and fighting the sharp sting behind his eyes. Mikey looked around, helpless, his fingers hanging loose at his sides as Raph watched after him, completely blank. "Um…Raph, I'm going to get Master Splinter. Just…just don't touch anything, okay? I'm coming right back." He nodded, encouragingly, and made a beeline for the door.

Just as he neared the threshold, though, he froze.

" *And I shall hear, though soft ye tread above me … and in my grave will richer, sweeter be* ."

He turned back.

Raph was singing at the computer. " *And you'll bend down and tell me that you love me. And I shall rest in peace until you come…to…* "

He looked up, eyes glittering and still dead above a Cheshire cat grin.

Michelangelo fled for his father's bedroom.

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* Um…sorry for creepy singing Raph. Danny Boy has been stuck in my head for a while and just slipped in…sorry, sorry. Spoiler alert, though: next chapter we finally find out why Raph has issues with the "outside" Donnie. Beware the room where the lights dance!

* Reviews, thoughts, critiques, please I love them all!

Where the Lights Dance

Disclaimer: TMNT does not belong to me.

A/N : Okay, some weeks ago, Vacant Houses challenged me to a duel to see who could mess the other's preferred character the most: hers being Raphael. Meh-heh-heh. Everything else has been building to this, so this is my official "submission" to the challenge. About as crazy as I can go within the limits of this story. Warning: there is some blood and ugliness in this chapter.

Where the Lights Dance

Rough hands twisted, grinding his wrist against the steel cuff until his knuckles tapped against the tabletop. The Foot adjusted the arm, exposing it to the room. Raphael's fingers closed, raising his bicep in a threat. It had atrophied over the past weeks, but still gave the soldier pause.

He looked up through the meshed fabric of his mask to meet the prisoner's savage glare. Shoulders bounced with a silent scoff before he wrapped a thin cord across the dark skin. The tourniquet bit into Raphael's muscle with a sharp tug, digging beneath the curve of his flesh. Staring stoically into the fierce gaze, the man moved around the table, out of sight. A sturdy leather collar bound to the steel frame prevented Raph from following his steps beyond the range of his peripherals.

Here he was after waking up to find himself in a new room. Again. Sluggish and lightheaded. Again. Lashed down. Again. Waiting to see whatever Karai had pulled out of that sick head of hers with absolutely nothing he could do about.

Again .

He hated predictability.

He also hated the routine which his life had found. No longer structured around meals or training or TV schedules, his quality time with himself was interrupted only for the nightly rounds of punishment. By the time he stumbled back into his room, his cooling bowl of gruel and water bottle were waiting for him. He'd also been provided a bucket in the corner now that his body was processing nutrients again. This was also freshly changed before his return, but it was a small comfort. As if trying to use a makeshift toilet wasn't humiliating enough, he also had to cram himself into the corner beneath the camera while making the attempt. And nothing is so distracting than a constant whirring above your head as a camera tried to adjust to keep an on you.

What idiot had to spend his time trying to joystick a camera around to peep on a turtle using a bucket? What a sucky job. He should put in for a transfer.

Then, there was the new absence of Karai. After her initial introductions to his treatments, as she liked to call them, she had vanished. The Foot who were left to carry out the endless routine with him said nothing. No more insults, no more threats. They just watched him, impassively, as he fought with them, was fried by them, or sat in their nasty little movie theater. The only spoken words passed were the emotionless charges of his family's crimes. And those were repeated to the point that he began to hear them in his cell as he tried to sleep or choke down his dinner.

Monotony, isn't it a kick in the head?

Donnie, Mikey, Leo…Mikey, Leo, Donnie…Leo, Donnie, Mikey… Over and over for hours, his head would run through endless lines of thievery, murder, arson, treachery, espionage. All graciously accompanied by the flickering images of their past fights he had to watch every night.

He pulled at his cuffs with a low growl.

Easy …

Oh, he forgot to mention the recently acquired commentary hosted by his brothers who weren't there.

"I got it, Fearless," he muttered.

The stern voice didn't miss a beat. **Just keep your head, Raph. Try to prepare yourself for whatever is coming…**

"I *got* it, Leo," he snarled beneath his breath. "She ain't breakin' me. Ya need me ta pinky swear on it?" He swore he could hear the long suffering sigh his brother would have given for that.

Ignoring Leo, Raph arched and strained against the collar to get a better look at the room. It wasn't much. A whitewashed storage room, maybe, heavily soaked in disinfectant. A door was directly before him, accompanied by a squat black window where he could see his withering reflection. He snorted at that and listened to the movement behind him. It sounded like the Foot was rummaging about a box of dentist tools. Every now and again, metal dropped against metal as he arranged…whatever it was he was arranging.

Oh, boy, a lab at last , Mikey chuckled somewhere behind his ear. This bodes well. Feeling at home yet, Don?

Actually, I prefer fluorescent lighting…

Raph glanced up at the gymnasium style lights and wondered why. Then he caught himself and sighed. Donnie, the *real* Donnie, probably didn't give a crap one way or the other about fluorescents. He hated getting dragged into these imaginary conversations…hated it more that it was happening frequently these days.

But you got it all together , Leo said snidely. Raph's lip lifted against the thought.

A sharp pinch bit into his elbow, followed by a rush of heat filling the joint.

Raph's eyes flew open. The emptied syringe pulled free of him, leaving a drop of amber liquid near the injection mark. Raph scowled at the lingering bite. "Ya frickin' trained how ta do that? Ya suck at it, pal!"

What was it? Leo demanded. Raph watched the man, expectantly, before realizing he hadn't heard his brother. He repeated the question.

"Something to take the edge off," the man said, thinly. "Karai's orders."

Raph started to have received an answer. "Take the edge off what? Where is she?"

The man carefully capped the needle. "She won't be attending tonight."

"Ehh?" Raph's brows met in confusion.

"Don't worry. In about two minutes, it really won't matter to you." He turned for the exit. The window wavered a bit as the door opened and closed.

"'Ey! Get back here! Whaddya…wha…oh, shhh -" His eyes rolled as the world tilted on him. He slumped back against the table with his head light and empty. The black window shifted, becoming soft and then smearing counterclockwise. Black lines, like trailing finger marks, sliced against the white wall. The reflections were pulled inward and rolled along the thick and oily surface.

Raph shook his head and tried to force it back into what a window should look like…it just didn't listen. He tilted his neck back as the collar allowed, trying to quell the dizziness that came from watching the waves of color.

Ten minutes, or an eternity for all he cared, he lay placid, watching as tiny jets of rainbows circled about the light fixtures. His finger

slowly rotated one way, then back the other as if he could orchestrate the movement. He hummed nonsense tunes to himself, pulled into the light show with a slight smile. They were hypnotic in a way, almost like watching snowflakes sweeping over a windshield.

His inner ear twitched as the door opened again. Slower footfalls drew near to him and his eyes rolled closed. "'Ey, Karai…"

"Didn't they tell you she wasn't coming?"

Raphael's attention snapped from the ceiling so fast the room spun about the face which was suddenly before him. "D-Donnie?"

His brother's mouth broke into a wide smile. "Hey, *bro* . How's it going?"

Raph blinked, sluggishly, and strained his ears for the voices of his brothers. He waited for Leo to do something. To approve or warn him against the sudden appearance. For his Donnie to suggest why he would drop out of the sky like this. But the voices were strangely silent. A tingle of uneasiness shifted through him that he hadn't noticed their absence…

But it didn't matter, right? Because Don was there in front of him. And they were the same, right? His body leaned forward, held up only by his bindings. His head felt like it was trudging through mud. He couldn't hang onto a single thought for more than a few seconds before it shot away.

"Raphael?"

"'Bought time ya got here," he muttered at last. "Ge' me down, brainiac."

Donatello remained where he stood, biting his finger as if he had a secret he knew Raph didn't want to hear. A small grin touched his mouth.

Raph frowned. "W-what? Untie me, Don…"

His brother sucked a breath as he shook his head. "Yeah, I don't think that is going to happen."

"Wha'?"

"I'm kinda here…on Karai's orders. Ah!" He snapped his fingers. "Excuse me, *Mistress* Karai's orders. I always do that…"

Shock spiked through the larger turtle as he gaped at his brother. It was hard though. The bright lights didn't seem to strike him properly. The shadows across his skin didn't match the rest of the room. Raph's eyes kept sliding away from him, too, as if unable to stay in place long enough to process the problem.

His words, however, burned through the prisoner's mind. "What did you call her?"

"Mistress," Don said, almost fondly, dropping his gaze to Raph's shoulder with a nostalgic smile. Revulsion crawled across the other's skin at the look. Raphael glanced to the door as worry laced along his stomach.

"Don…where's Leo?"

His brother looked up, annoyed. "He's fine. He stayed home. So it's just me tonight. But don't worry, big guy, I'm going to take care of you."

Big guy? Donnie meandered behind the table and a second later, Raphael squinted against the grating rattle of metal on metal. His younger brother swung a silver stand around before him, rolling dozens of thin tools over the tray. He began to shuffle through them, lifting each to be inspected before letting them fall with piercing clangs. Raph swallowed, thickly, as a wicked hook glinted an inch from his brother's nose. Don sighed and tossed it down.

"Donnie…" he tried again. "Don, w-what did she do? W-w-why ya doin'…this?"

Light brown eyes shot to him, still gleaming with amused knowledge. He lifted his brow and opened his hands as if the answer should have been obvious. "The pay is good?"

"D-does Masta know yer here…?"

Donatello straightened, running his thumb against the edge of a scalpel. "There we go. Simplicity is always the best choice, isn't it? And would a *yes* or a *no* be better to answer your question?" He smiled and set his hand beside Raph's cheek, leaning his weight closer. "Because it's not really a question about me at all, is it?" He grinned and dropped his head with a snorted laugh when Raph winced. "No, he doesn't know I'm here. He certainly doesn't know that *you're* here with me. So, sorry, no heart-filled messages brought in from the homestead, buddy."

"Don…"

He started as his brother's knuckle sudden rapped into his mouth, knocking his lower lip into his teeth. "Tush it, Raphael. I'm trying to work here." The scalpel spun in his fingers and he tapped a dotted line across Raph's forehead. "Nah, there's too many important things in there." The blade hooked beneath the emerald chin and lightly traced along the throat. "Nooo, that's gonna be way too messy. Where, oh where, should we go?" He drew back to tap the butt of the tool against his own teeth. "Actually…"

Raphael roared as the scalpel was driven into his side, bucking back the table as he tried to escape the assault. It slipped clean between two ribs and then twisted violently. Heat pulsed across his stomach and up his chest. The steel was ripped clear with a spurt of blood. Raph curled around the wound as best as he could with another cry. He looked up, horror-struck, and saw that Donnie was flickering before him. Just beneath his savage grin was bright red hair, thick-rimmed glasses, and a face filled with a mean streak Donatello had

never possessed. Then the image cleared itself and Raph was left to the sadistic fascination which mocked his brother's face.

He swore between clenched teeth as pain rocked him again and a sharp punch caught him full in the cheek. It shook his skull as he could not turn with the hit and Raph's world went hazy for a moment. By the time everything locked back into focus, Donnie was wagging a finger in his face.

"Course language has no place in a laboratory, Raphael." He peered at the wound and the dark blood gliding towards Raph's knee. "Yikes. But that does look painful." His fingers pried into the gash, pulling it wider.

Raph let out a muffled moan and twisted away from the new flash of pain. "Don't, Donnie!"

Don wrinkled his beak and rose, gracefully. "I'm only trying to help, buddy. Come on, this was an acceptable medical treatment back in the old days. The brightest minds of the time thought any ailment could be cured if they could just drain enough blood out of the system. You could go back farther to the time they thought mental diseases were caused by evil spirits. They'd crack the skull of the patient open to allow an escape route for the spirit. I mean, they've found skeletons that show where that treatment was executed several times." He wiped his bloodied fingers over Raph's shoulder. "Now, isn't that just barbaric?

"Myself, though," he continued, returning to the tray. "I prefer more modern techniques at getting to the core of the problem. The power of suggestion, for example. You familiar with that?"

Raph glared at him.

"No? Well, let me tell you what a wonder the brain is. Given even a few details, the brain will fill in the gaps to explain what is occurring in the present environment. Why do you think dreams go so crazy? One minute you're chilling on a beach in Maui, the next you're hiding

in a closet from a maniac. Insane and as illogical as a scenario may be, if you believe what you see is real, wouldn't you agree that there is some validity in the experience? I mean, you are feeling the world around you at the time, thinking of ways to escape the danger, wondering why your brother would stab you with a scalpel…"

Raphael stared at him, baffled at where he was headed with all of this. His hand strained against the cuff, fighting to cling to the fiery wound.

Donnie shrugged. "Well, anyway, I spoke with Karai and let her know that she's been going about this process all wrong. See, she could throw her thugs at you all she wants, but they ain't getting over those walls of yours, are they, Raphael? Do you know why? Because they are a viable enemy that has to be denied. They give you a task, a goal to resist them. And then are suprised to find you, a trained warrior, are immune to frontal attacks." He shook his head. "No. The trick to bringing down anyone's stronghold, is to get *under* the wall, get an enemy among the ranks. That is when you can do some serious damage."

"Whadd'ya…talkin' 'bout…?"

Don sighed and reached beneath the silver tray. He pulled out an empty jar and faced off with the prisoner. "You have to get under the skin, Raphael. Just a few layers, and everyone will be shocked to see how quickly things unravel." He lifted the jar before the other's nose.

Raph's gaze fell to it and everything within him tightened with fear. It wasn't empty at all. A massive beetle was arched against the glass, four of its legs waving wildly for a hold. Ugly pinchers snapped towards the lid. Raphael jerked, digging his heels into the footrest of the table and straining back against the collar.

"Something the matter?" Don asked, jovially, tapping his fingers off the lid.

"What is tha'…?"

"You tell me, Raphael."

He looked up at the calm face, desperately. "Don…y'ain't puttin' that thing on me…"

Don gave his brother a wink. "You are absolutely right, *bro* . I would *never* dream of it." He shifted his weight, strolling back around to the wound. "But you know how insects are still used to treat patients these days? Maggots to eat away rot, leeches to drain blood. This little guy can be useful too. He's gonna help us get to that core of yours just a bit faster."

The freaking thing seemed to double in size right before him. Raph snapped his eyes shut just to rid himself of it. But he could still see the bluish tint on its black shell, the ugly joints of its segmented legs, even the saw-like ridges lining its mandibles. He shuddered and returned to the light with a gasp.

Don was still at his side. Still smiling. "Curious to see how he'll do it?"

"Donnie… *please* …"

The scientist dropped to his haunches and unscrewed the lid. "Hang on a little longer, big guy." Raph flinched as the jar's cold lip cupped around the throbbing gash. Then, his eyes flew wide when the realization struck him.

"No! No, Donnie, don't!"

"Easy," the other scolded as he pressed the jar firmly to his side.

Raphael watched, frozen with terror, as evil pinchers touched the wound. Shoving aside torn skin, the beetle seemed to flatten, and the pushed itself into the gash. Raph let out a choked noise through his nose. One that was part terror, the other pure disbelief that this was happening to him. Then something skittered upward, moving

between his muscle and skin, and every handle he had on the situation was torn from him.

He screamed, arching against his bindings. His world turned upside down as Don shoved the table backwards. It bounced as it stretched out, horizontally, slamming him against the steel. The bug shifted inside him again and he writhed.

Another bellow worked its way up his chest, but was stifled as a cold hand clamped across his mouth. Donnie lunged onto the table with a whoop, straddling his brother about the middle. His right knee rested in the growing pool of the blood. He leaned forward, propping his elbows on Raphael's plastron as he shoved his face before the other's beak.

"Breathe," he said, reasonably. "Shh. Shh. Just breathe."

Raph fought against that hand, trying to see the door. He prayed for Leo to come storming in, or their father, or Casey, hell, he'd take Karai if she would just stop this nightmare.

"Told you the mind is a funny thing," Donnie grinned. Raph's shoulders jerked and the locks to his cuffs bounced, threateningly. Don didn't seem to notice. "You see, it is never a matter of outside force. It's a matter of bringing reality into question. Questioning your senses. What can you trust, Raphael? Who can you believe? Do you believe me? Have I ever lied to you before? You're supposed to be breathing…"

Raph's nostrils fluttered as he sucked in a breath.

Don nodded, approvingly, and pushed himself back, settling more of his weight across Raph's stomach. He reached his free hand to the seeping wound and pressed a finger to the inflammation. Raph's eyes rolled, dazed. Donatello dragged his finger upwards, towards the plastron. Raph clenched his teeth at a detached sensation of *something* shuffling after that finger.

Was that even possible? He didn't think so…but what did he know, he could feel it! It was an odd feeling, something he knew should have left him in agony. But the pain was ghostly, like it was being blocked by Novocain. He knew he felt it, he knew he should have felt it far worse, but it was so far away.

"After a while, what can't be brought into doubt? What sacred truth can be left unsullied when all the other ones fail you? What can't my Mistress take from you? What reason could you possibly have left to defend with all these walls?"

Air chugged erratically past olive green skin.

"Would you ever believe that your precious Donatello was capable of doing this to you? That Leonardo would leave you to die here? That there is no one in the outside world who will put in the effort to save you? It's a very messy situation, Raphael. Very easy to lose your grip, wouldn't you agree?"

Gold eyes bore into brown, no longer defiant, but pleading and frightened.

Don's finger traced to the line between Raphael's chest plates. Keeping it centered between the two, Don threw his weight over the side of the table, stepping down and removing his hand from the slack mouth. He smiled and adjusted a set of black glasses higher on his beak. Raph stared up at him, tiny hitches of breath passing through his teeth.

Donatello cocked his head, mischievously. "That, dear brother, is called planting a seed."

He tapped Raph's chest.

The thing beneath his finger began to burrow.

A gutteral roar tore from his throat. Raphael thrashed, smearing blood across the table. His hands hooked into claws, trembling with

the force to try and raise them. Donatello stood above him with all the cruel fascination of someone watching an ant burn beneath a magnifying glass. He stepped back with a satisfied smile, folded his arms, and looked to the black window.

Karai ran her fingers along her lower lip as she watched Dr. Chaplin move away from the table. He shot her a grin, folding his arms and lifting his chin, proudly. She scowled a bit at that and returned her attention to the convulsing prisoner.

"Raphael Hamato," she whispered to the dark room. "You are found guilty of lying, hijacking, vandalism, and assault upon my employees. As such, the punishment you will be subjected to for your own actions…" She paused and gave a small smile, "will undo you."

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* Kind of also a shout-out to Sam Riegel, who voiced both Donnie and Chaplin in the 2003 series. A very, very weird shout-out.

* Reviews, please? Also any thoughts, concerns, exclamations… brochures to local mental institutions, I'll take 'em all!

When in Doubt

Disclaimer: Nope, still not mine.

Chapter 12: When in Doubt

Donatello stood in the doorway for several moments before realizing just how long his blinks were becoming. After hours of running tests, measuring data, comparing results, and generally staring into computer screens, he wanted nothing more than to collapse immediately. The open space in the entryway seemed as good a place as any…

Aching feet trudged forward. His fingers dug at the growing knot in his neck as he looked around the quiet lair. It was late, but not late enough to justify the silence in their home. He swung around and a shiver of relief wound through him at the light drifting from the kitchen. Sniffing back his exhaustion, he headed towards the soft sound of Leo's voice.

Six different ice-cream containers were spread across the table. The seventh (Rocky Road) was propped on Mikey's chest as he sucked at a spoon. Leo sat across from him, hunched over a pair of grilled peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. He stopped speaking as Don's footsteps approached and looked to the table top.

Don set his shoulder against the doorframe. "You know, this does not appear to be the makings of a healthy dinner."

Mikey's knees hit the bottom of the table, jumping all the cartons to the side. He grinned. "It gets better." He pulled a bag of corn chips from his side. "We got these for dessert."

"Nice." Donnie nodded before something else caught his attention. At the end of the counter, his coffee-maker sat with a full pot and was accompanied by a fresh box of Oreos. Saliva flooded his mouth.

Mikey leaned forward, deepening his voice. "We have anticipated your return to the dark side, Donatello. Come, immerse yourself in sugar and caffeine."

"Like I ever left," Donnie said, pushing from the door and moving behind Leo to retrieve his own supper.

"Did you find anything?"

The question was offered so quietly that Don turned to be sure he'd actually heard it. Leo remained statuesque above his plate, but his eyes were angled slightly towards his brother. Donnie sighed and pulled the coffee pot free. "Yeah, we did."

He slid into the space next to Mikey with a steaming cup in one hand and the cookies in the other. Breaking the package open, he automatically handed four Oreos to his younger brother before selecting one for himself. He dipped it into the dark drink and looked to the leader, waiting.

He could see the expectation in his brother's face, but Leo held it back, as if he did not deserve to ask more of the inventor. Unaware how badly Donatello needed the follow-up question to come from him. Maybe it was stupid, but Don felt that if Leo asked it, the tension would finally break between them and they could begin to heal from -

"So, are you going to tell us or what?" Mikey demanded.

Don's eyes rolled closed before he turned to the youngest, all but feeling the missed opportunity gliding between his fingers. He sighed. "What we found in Raph's blood was a heavy duty sedative. The kind they use to tranquilize big game animals." He bit into his soaked cookie. "There was also something we couldn't identify." Leo looked up, sharply. "Not entirely, anyways. It had similarities to several types of hallucinates…it just *wasn't* any of them."

Mike and Leo exchanged a look. "What's that mean?" Mikey asked.

"It means he was subjected to an untested, and very powerful, mind-altering drug. Coupled with exhaustion and starvation…it could have made him see anything. A Leo who despises him, for example."

"Or a Donnie who works for the Foot?"

"Exactly."

Mikey frowned and shook his head. "No way. Raph's the toughest guy alive. A bunch'a bad dreams aren't enough to break him."

"Bad dreams, I think, is a grotesquely mild term for what this thing did to him." Don tipped his mug to gaze at the crumbs floating on the surface. "Whatever Karai did while he was under its influence…it was enough to make him retreat into his head. So far that he's created these personifications of us to deal with his situation, Mikey. He's protecting himself from her."

"Or himself."

Don and Mike looked across the table. Leo had a sandwich halfway to his mouth. Melted peanut butter plopped onto his plate. "I don't think he's hiding from anything inflicted on him. When he and I spoke this morning -"

"You mean when the psychotic version of you and he were talking?" Mikey said.

"Yes, then," Leo said, patiently. "Raph said he had made a promise that he'd broken. Something about letting Karai in. I think he's ashamed. He's afraid to let us find out what he's done."

Silence fell. One by one, their eyes crept to the empty space next to Leo. It was an oppressive oddity not to have Raphael there, sulking over his own meal. It would have been potato chips and cottage cheese.

"Where is he?" Don asked.

"In his room with Master Splinter," Leo said, glancing over to Mike. "He had another episode."

"Yeah," Mikey huffed, stirring his softening ice cream. "You finally made an appearance."

An unnatural edge tinted his voice and Don frowned. "What happened?"

"Well, he gave a rousing rendition of ' *Donnie* Boy' and totally zoned out before I ran and got sensei."

The inventor raised a brow toward the leader. "Ooookay…"

"It was weird, though," Mikey continued. "'Cause, when Raph was talking as *you* , it was like he was knew he was faking. The Donnie part, not Raph…this is so weird -"

Donnie clicked his fingernails off his mug. "Where did this happen?"

"In your lab."

He sat straighter, craning his neck towards the living room. "Did he touch anything?" Two snorts of disgust drew his eyes back to the table. "What?"

"Dude, we know you got, like, wicked important stuff going on in there…but priorities, man!"

"Prior - no!" Don rolled his eyes. "Not my projects. Did Raph touch anything before he started acting like me? What was he doing when you found him?"

"Trying to read an encyclopedia."

"Before that?"

"Went to the bathroom."

Don scoffed. "And before that?"

"He came out of Leo's room." Mikey's spoon paused and he looked up. "He stopped to look at your monitor…"

"You onto something, Donnie?" Leo asked.

"An inkling." Don pulled another cookie from the package and dipped it. "I think… look, Raph's been enduring tortures in our places. I think that it is possible that, with the drugs neutralizing his own personality, the punishments have become triggers. Whichever one he faced was like a signal telling him who he had to become in order to cope with the situation. Now, the hallucinations are being purged from his system and he's receiving no stimuli from the Foot." Mikey looked nervously to Leo, who shook his head. "He's creating triggers for himself in order to bring out the versions of us in his head."

"Like the monitor," Mikey said.

"Or when sensei said your name."

"And he'd brought my sweat shirt down into the dojo with him," Leo added slowly.

Mikey pushed himself higher in his seat. "But…he's been up in his room for a while now. Why hasn't anything in there *stimulated* him back to normal?"

Don shrugged. "Like I said, it's only an inkling. I could be way off the mark here."

Again, silence fell among the three. The only sound came from Mikey's spoon scraping the sides of his carton. He tilted his head back to drain the remains, set the empty container aside, and peeled back the lid to some very soupy mint chocolate chip.

"Six more, are you serious?" Donnie smirked.

He barely received a glance, but one of the cartons was pushed in his direction. "Five."

"I don't want your gross, freezer-burned sherbet," Donnie scowled, angling it towards Leo, who propped his elbow on the table to set his knuckles against his temple. Don shook his head. "You know, any dietitian on the planet would keel over if they saw this dinner."

Mikey's eyes gleamed. "Diet-smiet. All those health buff people change their minds every week. But ice cream, my dear brother, is the staple of all junk food. It will always be bad for you. And if they try to tell you that it *is* good for you, then you know it's not ice cream. It's frozen yogurt in disguise. There is no place for secret agent snacks on my food pyramid."

"Heaven forbid sugar and starch take a backseat to anything," Leo smiled.

"Ice cream is honest. The serving sizes are tiny. When the healthy dose of something so delicious is a half-a-freaking cup, it just radiates junk. Ice cream says, 'C'mon, Mikey, we both know I'll slow you down and give you an extra layer of warmth for winter,'" He patted his stomach, "'but we'll have a great time getting to that point.'"

"Do you realize you are still talking?" Donnie wondered.

"I'm just saying, ice cream is the foundation of bad eating. The anchor in this unrelenting war of calories and carbs and -" Leo's sandwich hit his plate. "Leo?"

"The anchor…a foundation." Leo whispered, his dark eyes widening. He looked to Don with a half-smile. "And a *trigger* …"

"What else do you think he can repeat?" Mikey whispered.

"Tssshh!" Donnie hissed.

"And…in case he gets…lonely." Leo sat back, grabbing his own head. "Oh! I am such an idiot!" He sprang from the table, all but leaving his chair spinning as he bolted into the dark living room. His brothers stared after him.

"What was that?" Donnie asked.

Mikey spun to him, grinning. " *That* , big bro, is known as a revelation! Leo, wait up!" Don sat, dumbfounded, before following after his brothers. He emerged into the family area just as Leo flew out of the dojo, battered sweat shirt in hand.

"No, no, no," the leader muttered. "After we got in the van…Mikey, go to my room and get Raph's mask right now. It's on my nightstand."

"You got it!"

Don grabbed Leo's arm as he blew past, heading for the door. "Leo, seriously, what are you -?"

"I know what the anchor is, Donnie," Leo panted, glassy eyed. "We're getting our brother back right now! Come out to the garage with me!"

"I remember the first night I let you boys sleep on your own."

Splinter sat in his weathered chair from the kitchen table. His back was bent so his chin could rest upon the head of his walking stick. His eyes were downcast, not towards the mattress, but to the cold floor next to it where Raphael was curled on his side. The turtle had slid off the bed soon after the rat had eased him onto it, pulling a thin blanket after him. Now, his dull eyes rested, unblinking, upon the rat's feet.

"I was so frightened that night," the father continued. "I felt you were all a million miles away. So far from my reach, so far away that

seemed if trouble arose…how would I get to you? How could I be sure you were safe and whole? Do you know how many times I snuck down that hallway just to check on you boys?" He smiled and drew a breath. "And how many times I carried your brothers back to bed after a nightmare or a bad feeling had awoken them? How many times I whispered assurances that nothing lurked in the night? That I was there to protect them? That there was nothing under the bed, or in the closet, or beyond the walls…"

His chin dipped down and he pressed his cheek into the back of his hand. "But you, Raphael, have never feared the unknown. You were never chased by the boogeyman, never doubted that I would be there for you. You have always been ready to face any enemy. How many lessons did it take before you considered running as a viable option, my son?" He chuckled again with a slight shake of his head. His smile faded as he got no reaction. "What has chased you so far away now? What fear has she filled my fearless one with?" His brows tipped downward at the edges. "Will you not speak with me, child?"

Raph tucked his chin a little closer to his chest. Slowly, he shifted and eased his free arm forward. Splinter watched, breathless, as trembling dark fingers extended to touch his claws. He reached down for his son's wrist, but Raph drew back as if dodging a striking snake, tearing his eyes from his father's feet and staring down into the cement.

Splinter pulled back, stung. He eased his weight back onto the cane. "I know you can sense the way home, Raphael. Come back…"

Raph flinched at the soft knock on the door. Splinter straightened. "Enter."

Leonardo slid into the dark room, halfway. "Master…may I…?" He hesitated when he saw his brother on the floor. "I need a word with Raph."

The rat nodded and rose, pushing the chair back. "Of course." His ears lifted as he noticed the slight breathlessness of his eldest and then spotted Michelangelo and Donatello pressing him from behind, trying to peek into the room. "What is going on?"

"I would like to try something," Leo said, stepping inside. Mikey was right on his heels, but Donatello remained in the hallway, nervously biting his thumb. Splinter drew next to his youngest as Leo swept to the bed and lowered himself to his knee. "Hey, Raph…" Gold eyes shifted upwards at last. Leo smiled. "Hey…I need you to sit up, can you do that for me? Come on, up on the bed."

Raphael pushed himself up and sat on the edge of the mattress. His hands rested listless upon his thighs and he leaned forward, watching as Leonardo moved around before him and squatted down. Black eyes smiled into blank gold.

"You rascal," Leo said, quietly. "You were losing yourself weren't you? In the middle of it all, you had to know what she was trying to do. You knew you had to keep yourself grounded. That's why you found yourself an anchor…an anchor for each of us." The others watched with bated breath as he drew his hand from around his back. Raph's head shot up.

Draping from Leonardo's fist were the ends of four filthy white rags.

"I forgot about them…" Leo said. "I didn't realize that you would still need them...I'm sorry."

Raphael swallowed hard, eyes fixed upon the strips with the strange, blank desperation that only Leonardo had seen before. Splinter lifted a hand to his mouth, watching his sons through misted eyes. Michelangelo's arm went about his thin shoulders. Donatello stepped inside the room.

Leo drew a breath, glanced back at his family, and then pulled one of the strips away from the others. "Who is this, Raphael?"

"Leo…?" Mikey began, uneasily.

"Donatello," Raph said. "Network hack -"

Leo threw it aside, gaining a muffled protest until Raph's eyes landed on the next. "This?"

"Michel-"

Gone. Raph's eyes followed the third strip as it was raised before him, enthralled as a bird beneath a serpent's gaze. Leo steadied himself, his voice barely audible. "And this one?"

"Raphael…Hijackin', vandalism, assault…"

His words drifted away as Leo took his hand and draped the strip across his open palm. The leader closed the emerald fingers about it. "Raphael Hamato, beloved son of Splinter…brother to Leonardo, Donatello, and Michelangelo. Guardian of New York City." Raphael's eyes widened, his breath drawing through clenched teeth. The leader gently tugged the rag from his grip, quickly replacing it with a silken, red bandana.

Raph took the fabric between his hands, his thumbs running across it. And like a spring bubbling upward, an untamed light filled his eyes. He sat back, lifting his withered shoulders and suddenly looked up, blinking. He gasped like a drowning man who's returned to the surface.

The family stood silent before him.

A line eased across his brow as recognition filled his eyes. "L-Leo? What'cha doin'...?"

The leader's face erupted with joy. He nearly collapsed forward, grabbing his brother's wrist with fierce relief. Raphael stared at him as if he were off his rocker, then slid his eyes to the side. To Splinter. His muscles tightened.

"Masta?"

The rat's fingers spread were across his chest as he gazed down at his son. Raphael slid from the mattress, gliding to his knees before his father. With a tiny sob, he slumped forward to grip him about the waist, pressing his cheek into Splinter's side. "I'm sorry…I'm sorry…"

"Raphael…"

"I didn't mean to…I didn't want…she said it was jes a word…"

Splinter glanced to Leo, who was on his feet in a flash. "Raphael?"

"B-but Leo got so mad…he's so mad at me…" He pushed back, suddenly, looking around at them. The mask slipped from his grasp. His shell hit the bed and he pushed back with his heels scraping over the cement. He dropped his head, shaking hands clamping over his neck. "I'm not s'pposed to…Leo said…I can' think'a you…"

"Raph," Leo said, reaching for him.

Raph jerked away, looking up as ice-cold venom filled his face. His lip drew back into a pompous sneer. His words were low and silky. "Weren't you asked to leave, *friend* ?"

Donnie swore.

"Leonardo," Leo hissed.

Raph glared at him, rolling to his knees. "Didn't I tell you he was a lost cause? He betrayed us…he dishonored our master…How dare you let our father look upon that waste? How dare you -"

"Enough!"

Splinter pushed both Leonardo and Michelangelo aside and grabbed his second oldest, pulling him forward. Raph's eyes went wide with shock. "My child, enough. You are not Leonardo. You are *my* Raphael. No matter what that woman has said to poison your

thoughts, you have not failed me. You are my warrior. My ninja. I will not lose you again."

Raph's eyes flicked between his. Gold and obsidian clashed before three thunderstruck brothers as the disdain drained from the fourth's face to be replaced by awe. Splinter's brow furrowed. "I have *never* been more proud, do you understand, Raphael?"

Raph's chest jerked with a soft puff of laughter. He leaned forward, into his father's embrace. His cheek was crushed against the ancient chest as tears slid freely along the other.

"Tha's the saddest thing I heard all day, Masta."

Splinter smiled. He drew his son closer.

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* You didn't think you'd see it, did you? Mwa-hah!

** Junk food…it leads to revelations...No? A'ight. Your thoughts, please?

The Severed Thread

* Language warning. A real curse lurks below. I do try to keep things family friendly...but just couldn't find an adequate way around this one. And Raph's had enough fun. The official over-the-edge descent begins now...

The Severed Thread

You all right?

"I got it…"

You're sure?

"Um-hmm."

Leo's voice dwindled back before adding. **I really don't think you do.**

Raph's brow flickered with annoyance, but any retort he may have thrown back vanished as warmth grazed along his cheek. He leaned into the palm with a slight groan. The heat was welcome against the thin layer of drying sweat. His muscles and joints pulsed with a dull ache, keeping rhythm with the pressure building behind his sinuses. He hadn't felt this miserable since that bad bout of flu he had caught a few -

The flu. Of course. He was sick. Sicker than a couple of pills and bed rest could cure. Sick and dehydrated to the point that his dreams had become this nightmare. A thumb ran along the ridge of his eye and he found himself waiting for the slow cadence of his father. Just like he always was, Splinter would be there when the fever broke and - and -

C'mon, Raph, Leo scolded, **that's just sad.**

He ignored his brother and pushed his cheek into the warm hand he knew to be his father's. It had to be. For the sake of his own sanity, someone had to be on the other side of this fog, trying to bring him back...

"Don't tell me you've given in so soon," a cool, feminine voice said.

Aw, hell…

His eyes opened, fighting both exhaustion and pain. Karai was close to him. Too close. Right in his face with her arm raised along the edge of his vision. Meaning it was her hand cupped to his - His jerked head back and he hissed as scorched muscles pulled.

"Still angry with me about the incident with Donatello?" she asked. "You know, I'm starting to miss those clever quips of yours."

He lowered his eyes and twisted his wrists against the cuffs. He winced at the now familiar sensation of raw flesh peeling from the metal. Stupid, freaking electroshock. He shot a glare to his left, where the nervous-looking technician still manned the generator. The young man flinched and quickly looked away. At least one of Karai's employees still found him intimidating.

What a friggin' joke.

Easy…

"I'm relieved you survived that last jolt," Karai continued. "I'd hate to have to explain a corpse to your family. Can you imagine? I would never hear the end of it." She sank down to the chair before him. "Vengeance is such a violent cycle, isn't it? Honestly, when will it end?" She pursed her lips. "A question you might post to your master one day."

Raphael stilled and her eyes crinkled with amusement. "If he'll take you, that is. Damaged warriors tend to develop into something of a

hindrance, so I've found." She flicked her hand as if batting the issue aside. "Well, you're family will discover this soon enough."

Tension knotted along his neck.

"But if you're allowed the opportunity, you'll ask him about vengeance for me, yes?" Karai tipped her head, trying to catch his gaze. "After all, if he hadn't been so utterly obsessed with Yoshi's demise…none of this would have happened. Wouldn't you agree?"

Raph's lips parted, but only to send a breath between his teeth.

Good, Leo growled. **Keep her out.**

"Still nothing? Oh, Raphael, don't shut me out now. It's unhealthy. And on our anniversary, too." He frowned and could not stop himself from meeting her eyes at last. "That's right. You've been my guest for two months as of today."

Two… *two* months? That's it? That's all it had been?

"Such a pity. I had anticipated there would still be some danger to you yet."

That couldn't be all it was…

"Still, it must be terribly exciting news for you. I bet you never thought to share any type of anniversary with a woman. Dreams do come true."

The bridge of his nose wrinkled and his gaze slid back to the floor.

Karai made a face and considered a moment. Her brow smoothed and she rose, gracefully, to begin a slow circle around him.

"Although, I confess I've wondered these past weeks about the days of your beginning. That must be a source of celebration for your family. Do you consider your birthday? Or was the rat still too animal to make note of the date?"

His chest tightened.

"Don't you spend much time pondering that day? Do you think on what your lives would have come to if everything had gone smoothly?" She tapped her chin, watching him from the corner of her eye. "Well, speaking of the rat, he'd have died long ago. His kind don't exactly have a favorable life expectancy. Living on the streets, susceptible to predators, not to mention he's a veritable *breeding* ground for diseases -"

The cuffs rang as Raph jerked himself upright. Rage scowled across his face. The technician slid back in his chair; neither woman or turtle spared him a glance. Karai's smile deepened and she tightened her circle.

"But what of you four? Would you have stayed together? Would Michelangelo have been some little boy's best friend? Could Donatello have been taught tricks? Fetch this, play dead." Raph shook his head, panting slightly.

What are you doing? Leo demanded.

"Leonardo probably still could have squirmed his way into the favored role, even as a pet. It's just in him, isn't it? Whereas you…"

Raphael!

He lifted his head to watch her. Pain throbbed between his ears, droning with the rush of his blood. Karai squared off with him, her arms loosely tucked about herself. "Well, you would have been flushed for biting your owner's mother or the like, I'd wager. Truly, you're the only one I could imagine being *set free* in the end. Most likely the one to find himself in the sewers after all."

Surprise sliced across the turtle's eyes. Then, his skull cracked off the table on its own accord. Karai straightened at the harsh noise which bubbled from his chest. His laughter came sharp and shrill over his lower lip.

"Sewers…" he wheezed at last. "Y-yeah, yeah. I-it all leads back to the sewers. Pry…pry could'a been born human…s-still would'a wound up ankle deep in sh...sh…heh-heh-heh." He dropped his head with a pained grin, his shoulders wracking with his laughter. He sniggered his way back into some resemblence of calm and let out a weary sigh.

"Whadd'abou' you, Karai?" he muttered. Dull gold eyes lifted, smudged with darkness. "What life would ya have had ta have ta not be the stuck-up bitch, huh?"

Silence struck the room as Karai's fingers tightened at her elbows.

You idiot.

"Leave us!" she hissed to the technician. He toppled to chair in his haste to do so. Once the door clicked shut behind him, her cold eyes flicked to Raphael. He bit his tongue.

"There goes that crude tongue of yours again," she said icily. "Just when I begin to believe there is hope for civility in you, you speak up again and all my hopes are dashed. And after all my leniency towards your noncompliance, too."

Noncompliance?

She swiveled on her heel and glided towards the generator. Reaching down, she twisted the dial five clicks higher. Raphael tightened, involuntarily, before fire drove into his belly. It twisted and writhed outward in a surge to his fingers and toes. The drone of the machine rang inside his skull and then vanished in a cold whirl of blue. He dropped again, hanging weakly from his bindings.

"When you arrived, I recall asking for respect, Raphael. You have yet to display the slightest effort in that request. I believe I have been quite patient to this point, but I'm growing so tired of this bile you continue to spew."

"An' here...I though' ya missed my voice," he growled.

"Repartee is one thing, blatant insolence on the other hand..." Raph's heart sank as the dial continued upward. Karai paused and lifted her hand. "However, I do understand the hesitance in submitting to an enemy." She set her hands upon the generator, leaning over it. "So I'll grant you one more chance to amend this behavior. I'm going to ask you a question, Raphael. If you answer correctly, then our time tonight will be concluded and you may return to your room. It seems a gracious opportunity, doesn't it?

He eyed her, warily.

"So tell me, Raphael...What name do you *know* that you are to call me by?"

His teeth clamped together, defiantly. Karai allowed twenty seconds of silence and then she threw the switch.

Lightning drove into the turtle's frame. He arched as his shell allowed, straing away from the table. Karai slowly approached her writhing captive with flashes of electricity lighting her pale face.

"Come now, Raphael, I know you're capable of displaying respect. I'm not asking you to kneel or bow or even bend your head to me. All I require is one little word."

Fire dug trenches into the very fibers of his muscle.

"You call me by name all the time. What does one more word hurt?"

Don't do it, Hamato! Don't you dare!

It hurts, Leo...

You said you could take it! Raph!

It hurts...

A low whine slipped, unnoticed, through his nose.

"I'm growing bored," Karai sang, dangerously. "Either put an end to this or I'll see you in the morning. Do you believe your heart will last that long?"

He collapsed, sliding against the thin matting with a groan. Karai shook her head. "Fine. Try not to bite your tongue off. I don't want to find that mess." She turned and made for the door.

Raph's eyes widened. Son of a - she was *leaving* !

It's a bluff! Leo screamed.

What if it wasn't? What if it wasn't? What if it wasn't? What if -

"M-m-m..."

Karai paused and looked back.

"M-m-m-hiss-ss-ess..."

She calmly walked back to the generator and leveled her eyes at him. The current died and the strength of his legs buckled. Steam rolled off his shuddering shoulders. Karai stepped over to him once more and leaned low to meet his eyes. "Excuse me, I missed that. what did you say?"

"M-m-mistress," he whimpered. "Mistress...Mistress."

"Now apologize for your behavior."

His lip curled and she took a step back. "M'sorry! Sorry, okay?"

Karai seemed to consider and tilted her gaze back towards the machine. "Apologize properly."

His throat worked, painfully, and Raphael lowered bitter eyes to her boots. "I...w-will ya... *you* f-forgive me...Mistress?"

Long fingers stroked over his cheek again. Karai stepped closer and sent a light sigh across his sweat-soaked brow. He cringed against the proximity between them, waiting (he wasn't sure why) for her lips to press against his forehead. But she only hummed and drew back to pat his neck.

"Now...was that so painful?" His eyes flickered with loathing and she smiled. "I don't expect you to waiver from it again, do you understand?" His head fell with a nod. "Good. I'll send someone to escort you to your quarters."

She snapped the light off as she departed, leaving him to shiver in the dark.

Hours later, he sat hunched in the corner of his cell. Knees drawn up, arms fixed tight about his middle. His fingers and toes were tingling and hot. He licked at his stinging hand and then flexed it into a slow and stiff fist. His knuckles were tight and thick. Sighing, he rested his elbows on his knees and looked around with his mouth turned downward.

Don't, Donnie whispered. *Don't think on it, Raph. You only did what you had to.*

He huffed, bitterly. "Ta survive, righ'?"

Yeah, man. Come on, it was just a stupid word. It doesn't mean anything.

Mikey's comfort was refuted, however, by a chunk of ice which turned between his lungs.

"Leo? That you?"

The near constant presence of his elder brother's voice had vanished the moment he'd whispered the treacherous word. For once, Raphael actually longed to hear Leo harping at him because

that would mean that everything was still okay. But Leo's silence wore on, drilling in the truth that the other two seemed desperate to reject.

That what had happened that night was anything but okay.

Worse yet, Raphael had the feeling that the ties which had always united the older brothers together, frayed and tenuous though they were, had finally snapped. And that thought filled him with more fear than any Karai could have inflicted upon him.

"Please, Leo," he whispered to his knees. "Ya gotta say somethin'. I'm goin' crazy here."

Nothing.

Heat stung the back of his eyes and Raph cupped his hands around the back of his head. He could practically see the look which would have been searing through him if Leo had been there. That terrible disappointment intermingled with the mildest of disdain. That's how he'd always seen it, anyway, though he doubted if that was the intent behind the look. It was a killer which tore from the inside out, and left a wake of guilt which Raphael usually covered with snide remarks and sarcasm.

He despised that look.

It was something Leo picked from Splinter along the years. A variation of their father's own piercing look. However, Splinter's disapproval, no matter how fierce, had always been tempered with forgiveness waiting in the wings. He imagined the rat kneeling in his room, surrounded by candlelight and peace. Fury surged up his chest as Karai's words slid like venom through his thoughts. He growled and threw his head back into the wall, clutching his fists.

She wasn't going to take this from him. She wasn't going to poison the influence of his father.

Breathing deep, he focused again on the image of his sensei. He pictured the dark eyes flashing open as they always did at a hesitant knock at his door. Eyes which were stern and steadfast and could scorch with anger, but could also fill with mischief faster than Mikey's. How many times had he sought them out for comfort or mercy? How many times had he tried to get that small smile which could touch his eyes without ever twitching his mouth?

Raphael's breathing began to still. What would he give to see those eyes again? Even if they burned with wrath for his son's cowardice, or filled with disappointment at his weakness, or even turned away in revulsion if need be, just so long has he got the chance to -

How dare you?

He gasped as his eyes opened, and then cried out. Crouched before him was the shaded outline of his older brother. He was smudged and indefinite in form, but the anger blazing from white eyes was all too vivid.

How dare you think of my father after what you've done? Leo's voice was low, silky, and dangerous. **You think you can soil his memory with your dishonorable thoughts?**

"L-Leo..."

You cowed to her will, Raph. You gave her everything she's been after. With one *insignificant* word, you granted her what she's been trying to show you. That we're nothing but animals which can be broken. The glowing white narrowed into slits against shifting dark. **And you would think to seek solace from my father? I don't think so, Raphael.**

"He's my dad, too -"

Leo's chin tipped down. **You forfeited the right to call him that when you chose to save your own skin. You forfeited *all* of us to save yourself a bit of pain.**

Leo, that's enough!

Yeah, ease off, man!

The figure fell back maybe a foot, just enough to cock his head, curiously. **You groveled before our enemy. You begged mercy from her. You declared yourself one of her slaves. Should you be forgiven for that? If I could, I'd take my brothers and leave you to rot with that decision, Raph!**

"Leo, please, don'..." Raph whispered, drawing closer to himself. "Please...I can' do this wit'out ya...I can' do this alone..."

But do you *deserve* my help anymore?

Raphael winced. He dropped his head, covering his face as his shoulders began to quiver. Pain laced up to his ears as a sob broke through his pinched throat. The heels of his hands jammed against his eyes but could not stop the warmth which spilled along his cheeks.

That is exactly what I thought, Raphael.

Leo vanished like a drop of ink in water.

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* Okay, it was a long wait for the shortness and a bit of downer...but it was fun to write! I love doing Karai's lines...And a teaser for Chapter 14 (which will hopefully come more swiftly) for LazyPanther who has been so patient. Don vs. Leo flashback...it's here.

* As always, I appreciate your thoughts, your questions, your reviews and critiques! Till next time!

What No One Saw

Disclaimer: I do not own TMNT

A/N: Here it is, finally! Fights are hard! I hope you enjoy it.

What No One Saw

The Lair...Four days earlier

Silence was beginning to gnaw at him.

Leonardo stood behind the couch, his arms folded and chin tipped downward. His ears strained against the thrum of apathy which had consumed his home. He'd lived with it for almost three months, had allowed it to eat at his mind as he waited for something, anything, to spark them into action again.

Oppression ticked against his left eye in a way that was frighteningly familiar. It swelled from beneath his gut and clashed against the pent up frustration in his chest, creating the dull wrath behind his eyes. He'd dealt with such feelings before, but under the guidance of the Ancient One in Japan. And that had been after the explosive fight which had left his father injured. He never wanted to face a repeat of that incident and yet he didn't know how to purge the pressure building within him. He didn't have the brash little man to shout him out of his own head, he didn't even have Raphael to -

He swept a thumb across his eye with a bitter laugh. Great, just great. Here he was, his sanity slowly breaking apart over the loss of his brother...and he wanted Raph around to expel his own issues onto? Oh yeah, that was the reasoning of a sound mind.

Maybe he should have gone to get dinner instead of Mikey.

He moved to his left and frowned at the reflection in the TV screens. Several distorted figures stared back at him from the glass. They

were smudged and grainy; specters in a world of gray. Yet somehow their eyes were sharply defined and vivid with contempt - he turned away, sharply, setting his shell against the back of the couch.

Aaaand now he was seeing things. Perfect.

He looked towards the dark kitchen and bathroom, rolled his gaze to the shadowed ceiling, and then shifted it over to the second-story railing. Geez, it was so quiet *.*

He found it odd that Raph's absence would have this effect on their household. Raphael wasn't exactly verbose by any means, but he had no trouble making his presence known. Be it in the steady sound of training from the dojo, or the dull beat of music beyond his bedroom door, or the distant banging and drilling which drifted from the garage. He had always been there. Leo even found himself lying awake in the earliest moments of morning, waiting for his brother's heavier gait to come sneaking down the hallway as if he'd just been out too late with Casey.

Leo growled and kicked the couch with his heel. It budged forward an inch and left a flash of heat sprawling across his foot. He hissed and sat down, rubbing at his heel, scornfully.

He really, really should have gone to get dinner.

Then again, Mikey's nervous energy had been chipping at his patience all day. Not that Mikey had done anything worthy of his temper. Not so far as anyone with a firm handle on reason could detect, anyways. No, his offenses were subtle and far more grating because he didn't even know he was doing it.

It was in his face. Every time he ran into his younger brother, Leo saw it. Hope. That unyielding faith and slight expectancy that Leo was just biding his time to produce their missing sibling out of thin air. That naive loyalty only fueled Leo's frustrations until his skull felt like it was full of boiling water.

As for Donnie...

Leo lifted his gaze from the cracked floor. He hadn't seen Donatello for almost a week. Not since their return from the last search. Donatello's professor friend from the streets had been hearing rumors of a bunch of "disguised" men had been spotted moving back and forth from an abandoned building in an older and more questionable part of town. Donnie had almost crashed through the garage door in haste to tell the others.

When they'd returned from the building almost empty handed, he had walked straight into his laboratory and, for the first time Leo could remember, had shut the door against his brothers.

He hadn't seen it open since.

The smack of the lab door echoed through his head, along with the dark, warning look he'd gotten from his younger brother before he vanished. His foot still throbbing, he was striding across the living room and up the three steps before he had realized he was going to investigate. His knuckles rapped off the door and went unanswered. The doorknob gave beneath his palm and he swung it outward. But the moment the seal on the frame was opened, he had an odd feeling that he had just broken into a vault. He half expected there to be a hiss of stale air to sweep over him. Instead, darkness flowed from the other side of the door. Leo's warning systems went critical.

The lab door being closed was unusual, the thought of Donnie just sitting in the dark was worrisome, but the tension which rolled from his brother's sanctuary all but screamed that something was terribly wrong.

"Hey, Donnie?" He peered into the void and realized that not all the lights were off. At the opposite side of the room, where Don's workstation was, a silhouette was blocking most of the bland light from the main computer. Leo cocked his head and stepped over the threshold. He passed the infirmary without sparing it a glance,

unaware that in four days time, he would be wrestling his lost brother to this very floor.

Drawing closer to the workspace and moving down the extended desk that ran the length of the wall, he found his way blocked by a pair of fold-out tables. Maps were strewn across both of them. Old and new views of the city, detailed sketches of each section, there were yellowed pages showing the original sewer and subway tunnels. A thick stack of paperwork seemed to be the purchasing manifests and activity among warehouses throughout New York. He recognized a thin log which Mikey had been taking with him on his nightly runs, which documented the movements of the Foot when he could find them. And scattered all around where dozens of snapshots of the rooftop where Raphael had disappeared. Taken from different angles, there were notes on the back of each which outlined possible routes which could be taken from the building.

His nose twitched at a thick, almost sweet smell that drew his attention to the short wastebasket nearby. Leo had only ever seen it partially filled, always by shredded papers. Now, it was overcome by a precarious tower of pizza boxes and Chinese takeout and dozens of bags and cups from various fast food joints. Something somewhere in the midst of that tower was rotting, tainting the usually pristine work environment which Donnie thrived in. Leo swallowed past the smell and looked beyond the tables.

Hunched over the main computer screen, his face ghostly in the harsh light, was Donatello.

His fists were braced on either side of the keyboard. Tension coiled up his arms and neck, casting the corded muscles in shadows. His eyes were fixed on the bookshelf above his head and he seemed to be seriously considering ripping the whole thing down. The upper line of his teeth was exposed in the thin snarl which had overtaken his face.

Red fabric lay carefully folded next to the fist nearest Leo.

Raphael's mask.

Dread filled the leader.

Oh, yes, they'd returned from the abandoned building almost *empty handed. The second time Donnie had been so sure that he'd found his brother, Karai had left a souvenir behind. Mikey had found it pierced onto a broken antennae right before they'd left. He'd been hopeful, of course, making some reference to bread crumbs that Leo couldn't remember as he'd lost himself to mindless fury for a few moments.*

They had been so close! Again.

Donnie had taken the mask from Mikey and broke Leo out of his stewing by knocking shoulders with him as he passed by. The inventor's eyes had been seething as he muttered, "Rats in a maze...and she's laughing her ass off at us..."

"Donatello?" Leo asked.

"Hmm?" he grunted.

"Are you okay?" Light brown eyes turned to him, incredulously and Leo offered a weak grin. "Yeah, I kinda figured."

Donnie huffed and seemed to stir himself out of his brooding. He crossed to the tables between them and began gathering papers, ripping them in half to be thrown half-heartedly towards the overwhelmed garbage can. Leo watched a moment and then pulled one of the maps towards himself, curiously. An olive green hand slammed down on it and wrenched it from his fingers. Donnie shoved it back into place and fixed a warning glare on his brother before moving over to the smaller, second computer which was running some sort of grid system.

That stung. Leo cracked his knuckles, nervously, and each pop seemed painfully loud against the ominous quiet. The leader made

his way along the tables so he was even with the second youngest again. Donnie closed out of the program and began dragging icons over to the Recycle Bin with disgusted growls. Leo tapped his palms together and glanced towards the cot which sat at the very back of the lab. He frowned at the untouched blankets.

"Donnie? When was the last time you slept?"

"Dunno."

"You don't know? *" Leo asked with a scoff. "How's that possible?"*

Donnie lifted his shoulder.

"How about the last time you had real food?"

Grunt.

Annoyance tightened along the leader's jaw. He understood frustration and this horrible sense of helplessness which none of them were accustomed to. But since when did he have to tolerate grunting as proper answers? Beyond Raphael, of course...The tight drone started low between his ears again.

Nope. This wasn't acceptable little brother behavior.

He shoved the two tables aside, wincing against the grating shriek of the legs along cement. He grabbed Don by the arm and hauled him backwards. Donnie, who had sunk to his haunches while he worked, stumbled after him.

"Leo, what the -?"

"Come on," he said sternly. "We're getting you out of here."

"Let go!"

"It'll be good for you," Leo said, ignoring him. "We'll get you some food, a little sunshine, something alive to talk to for a change. You'll

feel like a new turtle."

Don struggled and slid behind him, prying at his fingers. "I don't want..."

"And I don't want to hear about it," Leo growled back. "I'm getting you out of here for at least an hour. This isn't healthy, Donnie. And it's not helping anything. You can't stop taking care of yourself just because-"

He was pulled to a stop as Donatello dug his heels in. Looking back, he was startled to see fury in his brother's eyes. "What?"

Don shoved his hand off and fell back a pace. "I'm not helping?"

Leo blinked. "No, I just meant that...that you shouldn't be hiding away in here just staring at your equipment. I mean...look, Donnie, if this stuff hasn't found Raph by now...I don't think it will."

Donatello stared at him as if he'd just been slapped. And that look felt like a punch to Leo's gut.

"Donnie, I -"

"Screw you, Leo." His words died at the softness in his brother's voice. Donatello eye's narrowed. "You think I don't know that? You think I don't know that every minute I spend in here trying to figure out what happened is another minute that Raph is stuck with her? There is no one who knows that better than me!" Leo opened his mouth, but nothing came out. "This is all I know *, Leo!" Donnie continued with a hint of desperation, swinging his arms out to his lab. "I'm doing all I can and it's not enough. I know that! But at least I'm trying!"*

Leo's brow flew up in surprise. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning," Donnie growled, "where do you get the nerve lecturing me about anything when you've completely shut down."

"I have not," Leo shot back, his anger bubbling at the accusation. "I got out searching every night, just like Mikey does."

"Searching," Donnie hissed, doubtfully.

Leo's eyes widened. "What do you think I'm doing?"

"Twiddling your damn thumbs for all I know!" Donnie threw his hands in the air. "You don't talk to us anymore, Leo! You don't offer up a plan, you don't have any ideas, you just sit and wait for Mikey or me to find something."

"We can't plan anything without knowing something first!" Leo lifted his shoulders, helplessly. "What do you want me to do?"

"Anything! Anything that shows you actually care about Raphael!"

Leo's tired eyes locked on his brothers. "What did you say?"

"You heard," Donnie growled, his voice low and dangerous. "You sit and wait while your friend *does who-knows-what to our brother." Leo winced and Donnie advanced a few steps, shoving his face into the other's. "I'd just like to know which side you're on, 'cause you sure don't seem interested in ours!"*

Leo's eyes widened. Then his fist cut upward before he could stop himself. Donnie's head snapped as he staggered backward. He caught himself on one of the tables, but the rusted leg gave beneath his weight and he went down. A flood of paperwork rained over him as he looked around, stunned to find himself on the ground. Then he took in the mess sprawled about himself and something sparked across his face.

He looked up to where Leo stood, dumbstruck, as he gathered his legs beneath him.

"Donnie, I -"

With a feral cry, Donnie shot from the ground. He threw his shoulder into Leo's gut, taking him off his feet. Leo's shell cracked off the workstation and he slid down, grinding his carapace off the two drawers behind him. He hit his tail on the cement and Donnie slammed him into the drawers again. Leo snarled and drew up his knee, planting his foot center on his brother's plastron to kick him away.

They were back on their feet in a flash. "Donnie, wait!" Leo said, lifting his hands. "I admit, that was out of line -" His neck snapped to the side from a vicious right hook and he felt his lower lip tear against his teeth. Leo staggered back, spitting red into his palm and staring at it in shock.

Donnie had done this to him? Donnie?

A sharp shove to his chest made him stumble back farther. His shell struck the lab door and he made a wild grab, catching himself by the doorknob. His heels dangled over the first step, precariously and he threw out his other arm for balance. He teetered for a second before regaining a bit of composure. But as he straightened, it was only to see Donnie spinning in to deliver a powerful kick to his stomach.

Efficiently throwing his older brother out of the lab.

Leo felt a sharp jolt through his hand as the top hinge of the door was torn free before he lost his grip on it. He had a few seconds of disorientation as his feet left the steps and he flew out into the living room. His vision was jolted as he hit the cement, the grinding squeal of his shell along the floor vibrated through his head before he slid to a stop. Then he found himself staring at the ceiling.

Light steps descended from the lab and he groaned, rolling to his knees. Donnie was striding towards him, still ready to fight and more than prepared to offer up a piece of his mind in the process. His fist drew back even as Leo's lip curled in anticipation meet the next blow. He'd tried to apologize, he'd tried to reason with his brother, but

if Donatello wouldn't listen, then perhaps fate had granted him a way to purge his own fury after all.

Strength surged through his legs as he began to rise...

"My sons!"

Leo froze. Donnie froze. The whole lair seemed to lock into place at the two words. The next moment, Splinter was there, standing between them. His hands were raised towards his children, his face open with the shock to find these particular two at odds. Donnie didn't even spare him a glance but kept his livid gaze fixed on the leader. His fists were trembling at his sides, a whole slew of insults danced through his eyes, but he held himself back in the presence of their master.

"Boys, what is going on?"

Leo blinked as the whole scene flashed behind his eyes again. His frustration seemed to drain from him as cold reason took its place. Shame creeped up his cheeks. He'd started the whole thing. He hadn't meant to, he'd only been trying to help hadn't he?

He thought of his growing rage throughout the evening and suddenly, his intentions for entering the lab didn't seem wholly benevolent.

"Leonardo?" Splinter pressed.

He looked to his father and then beyond him to his sibling. Donnie's face was slipping back into his normal mask of control, effectively smothering his own rare temper. Leo opened his mouth without anything to say and then he pushed himself up. He turned, panic and shock tightening his chest as he made for the front door. He heard movement behind him, but didn't sense either his father or brother coming after him so he kept on going.

He escaped into the cool dark of the sewers, where he spent the next two days wandering in quiet solitude. Thinking, always thinking, on what had happened over the last three months. He wept at times, he expelled his disappointment and failures against the walls or let out primal screams of frustration. But mostly, he thought. And when he returned to the lair, it was with a plan in tow.

A ridiculous plan. One dangerous and reckless and so blatantly forward that Donatello immediately found ten errors of judgment within it and Mikey questioned his very sanity for even considering it. But it was a plan nonetheless.

And he couldn't help but wonder...

If Raphael would have approved.

Donatello leaned against the kitchen sink, watching as Splinter carefully ladled soup into a large bowl. Mikey stood next to their father, shooting him pleading looks, and shaking his head head.

"I don't know if this is such a good idea, sensei."

Splinter didn't seem to hear him. "A warm meal will do your brother wonders, Michelangelo. This stock, in particular, I've always found to help soothe the spirit from illness."

"But why do I have to be the one to...I mean," Mike shrugged, "I ran from him, sensei. No one else ran away, but I didn't know what to do. I know he remembers..."

"All the more reason why you should be the one to support him now," the rat said, carefully setting the bowl into his youngest's hands. He took his son's shoulders. "Be with him, speak with him, and do what you do best, my son."

Mikey looked to Donnie. "Translation?"

Splinter shook his head. "Michelangelo. Be his brother."

"Oh," Mikey leaned his head back, "Well, why didn't you *say* so?"

The father gave a tolerant smile and Donnie made his move, pulling a small packet from the counter. He opened it and poured a fine powder into the amber stock, quickly stirring it away. Splinter and Mikey both gave him a frown and he sighed.

"It helps with sobriety. Leatherhead put it together after he saw what was in Raph's system. It should take away the personality shifts and clear his head."

Splinter nodded his consent and Mike blew out a sigh, his fingers tightening around the bowl. He left the kitchen, walking with all the resigned dignity of a man about to be executed. Donnie huffed a light laugh at his solemnity and then realized his father was watching him.

"Sensei?"

"Donatello, I would speak with you."

The turtle's neck prickled. He didn't have to wonder much about what. "Yes, sir."

They slid their chairs from the table and sat across from one another. Donnie sat with his hands clasped between his knees, his chest near to the tabletop, and just for a moment he felt like a child. Like he'd been caught playing with the fuse box again and was waiting through a time out . Splinter studied him with his most serious expression, the one none of them could refuse.

"I'd like you to speak with Leonardo."

Donnie glanced up. "I didn't start the fight, sensei."

"It seems as though you finished it, as far as I could tell."

Not entirely true, it was more of an interception than a finished conflict. "It's nothing, sensei. Leo and I have been talking."

"You and Leonardo have been *coexisting* , not talking."

Crap, he couldn't deny that.

"You are brothers, you should not be divided as you are. Not after so much time has passed."

His knuckles cracked, nervously, beneath the table. "He hit me first."

"Does it not stand to reason, then, that your approaching him would be the first act of forgiveness between you?"

Dang it.

Splinter's whiskers twitched with a smile. "I know you are not accustomed to confrontation, my son. Nor have you often had reason to search to resolve conflict. It is a painful and undesirable position to find oneself in, isn't it?"

Donnie glanced up from beneath his brow and, finding no condemnation in his father's face, allowed himself a weak grin. "Yes, sensei."

"Consider it a rite of passage, then. Or a lesson in humility."

The son rubbed slick palms against one another as he looked towards the door. "Must there be a lesson in everything, sensei?"

Splinter's smile deepened. He lifted his chin. "Only when there's something to be learned." He slid his chair back and circled around to where his son sat. He kissed the top of Don's head and then chucked him lightly beneath the chin, a gesture he reserved only for his second-youngest. "Not all wounds are physical, Donatello, you know this. Talk to your brother."

Donnie sighed and pushed back from the table. He hesitated just a moment, checking the empty entrance into the kitchen and then gave his father a hug, something he'd fallen out of practice of in recent years. "I'll do my best, sensei."

Then he left the kitchen in search of his older brother.

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* I hope it went okay! I tried to keep them level in the "who's-the-bigger-jerk" department, but I don't know if it got pulled off. Shall we put it to a vote?

Denied

Disclaimer : TMNT does not belong to me in any way...

Denied

Raphael threw himself into shadow and winced as his shoulder slid across brick. His muscles shook as he leaned into the wall. Fresh air scorched his lungs in a way he almost relished. He grinned, thinking those candle companies had all missed the mark. Screw their Sunlit Meadow or Refreshing Sea Breeze...he'd take Trash-Strewn Alley any day.

That clotted mixture of old fast food, humanity, and hot pavement...yeah, that's the smell of freedom.

His eyes traced the rooftops as he pushed himself back up. There was no trace of the Foot following. He stumbled into the center of the alley and made his way towards the end of the buildings, biting back a rising surge of hysteria. Though, whether it wanted to break through as a sob or a laugh, he wasn't quite sure.

Not that he cared, really. The only thing that mattered was the fact that he knew this alley. He knew the street which lay at the end of it. It was a quiet little neighborhood whose occupants were either so old they turned in by eight or so young that they had to work double shifts just to pay their rent. Whichever way he looked at it, he never had to worry about being spotted during his prowling hours.

He paused for the habitual scan up and down the sidewalk and then slid himself into the moonlight. The night remained calm around him and, as he walked, relief broke the tension in his shoulders. He moved out into the street, dropped to his knee and hooked his fingers -

A heel drove into his shoulder, throwing him backward. Raphael slammed into the side of a car. Glass rained around him as he landed. Shaking his head, he looked up again and his heart sank.

"Pathetic," the shadowed figure snarled. "You're not even trying."

Raph glared at his "brother", which had become quite a challenge of late. The clearest thing he could make out was the blue band which shrouded the blank eyes. Pupilless, narrow slits of white which gleamed with judgment and never, ever softened.

Raph snapped his own eyes shut and shook his head. But when he looked again, the monstrosity was still there. Darkness shifted beneath the thin definition of his muscles, but never completely solidified. Whisps of shadows fell from his shoulders as he crossed his arms.

"Notice anything?" he sneered, opening his palm to the empty street.

Raph glanced around, sullenly. He flicked a sparkling shard from his arm. "It's a nice night?"

Leo's teeth flashed. "It's a perfect *night. Clear sky. Full moon. No one on the street. No Foot soldiers following you. You have no wounds from your escape. You're barely even winded. This isn't an escape plan, it's a freaking daydream!"*

"Ha!" Raph's shoulders bounced. He leaned back against the car, hear the soft clicking of glass rolling from his shell. His head turned towards the sky as his bitter laughter rolled into the quiet.

Leo's eyes narrowed further and a ripple shuddered along the line of buildings. "What's so funny?"

"You'd know all about daydreams, wouldn'cha?" Raph grinned, weakly. Leo's head cocked, suspiciously, and Raph sniffed, hauling himself up by the car's side mirror. "Yer tryin' s'hard, ain't ya? Tryin' so hard ta be Fearless."

"Leo" lowered his chin, the shadows beneath his skin swirling.

"Y'ain't Fearless," Raph growled again. "Never will be. Ya act like 'im, but yer as big'a daydream as any of this..." Leo hissed as he approached. "Now git outta my way."

"What do you think is waiting down there?" Leo snarled as he eased back, glaring at the manhole cover. "There's nothing but more illusion and denial. You can't escape her by going deeper into your head!"

"I ain't tryin'..."

"Do you think you still have a firm enough grip on reality to remember what home looks like? You think you can deal with finding how big of gaps you have in your memory?"

"I don' care. I jes wanna go home, Leo."

" That *isn't home," the shadow spat, jabbing a finger at the sewer entrance. "Your family isn't going to be there. And there's no guarentee that you'll find your way back out of there." He lifted his lip in disgust. "You've never been great at the meditation thing. Do you really want to start playing with it now that she's unhinged you?"*

Raph looked up, sharply. "She ain't..."

" Ain't *she?" Leo growled as his smile reappeared. "Then why am I even here?"*

The larger brother frowned and shook his head. "I can make it back, Leo. I got -"

"This. Yes, so I've heard." His foot slammed down on the cover, blocking Raph again. Fire flashed briefly in the other's eyes and Leo's dark mouth curved with smugness. "Tell you what, I'll make you a deal. You prove to me that you still got everything together up

here." He tapped his finger off Raph's forehead and got his hand shoved away, forcefully. "And I'll let you go."

"How am I supposed ta do that?"

"Simple." Leo said, lightly. He touched a knuckle to his chin, quizzically. "You say I'm not really Leo. So answer me this: Who am I?"

Raph blinked at that. He looked the dark figure up and down and fell back a step. His brow furrowed and he looked away, down the street.

"Uh-oh, somebody's not liking what he's suspecting," Leo grinned. "Ugly truth, ain't it? If Leo's good, as you love to tell me, implying that I am not...and we both know that even Karai couldn't have injected me into your little cerebellum...who could I possibly really be?"

Raph's fingers trembled into fists. "Yer not me..."

"Aw, denial..." Leo stuck out his lower lip. "That hurts me on the inside, you know. And aft'a all we been through ta'getha."

The white glow faded from his eyes, revealing fierce, gold irises.

Raphael sucked a breath through his teeth and shook his head, angrily. "Dammit, Leo, git outta here!"

"No can do, Raphie-boy."

Raph snarled and swung out, blindly, stumbling when he hit nothing but air. He caught himself, hands on his knees, and found himself staring at the silver words gleaming from the ground: New York City Sewer System.

His eyes stung.

An elbow propped onto his shoulder. "I get it, though. I wouldn't want to admit that I'm really you, either. I mean, why else wouldn't you have the balls to bust outta here by now?" Raphael cringed. Leo's

voice shouldn't be tainted by words like that. "She's castrated you, bro. She's cut me off from the whole. Tsk. Tsk. That's gotta sting a bit."

Raph bared his clenched teeth. "I gotta listen ta Karai's crap all day. Do I hafta listen to yers, too?"

Leo made a pleased, humming noise. "Fine. I'll cut you a new deal. You show me what the real Leonardo looks like, right here, right now, and then I'll let you go down there. Hell, I'll even guide your way back myself."

Raph glanced back at him. "Seriously?"

"Easy enough," Leo drawled, "isn't it?" His smile dropped. "But if you start out with 'Leo's good', I will hang you with my own bandana, capiche?"

The other straightened, pulling from his brother. He pace a few feet away and turned back to the expectant gaze. "Leo, he's...he's the leader...he's my older brother..."

"That's Leo," the shadow smirked. "Now what's he look like?"

Raphael stared at the asphalt beneath his feet. His eyes widened and he looked up, fearfully.

"Drawing a blank, are we?" Leo's teeth flashed with venomous delight. "Maybe Leo's too hard. Why don't we try another? Say...Donatello?"

Raph flinched against the manic grin that he saw behind his eyes. He scratched at his chest and the hollow feeling which still rested beneath his plastron.

"How about Mikey? I'll even give you a hint. Catch!" His arm shot out and Raph barely caught the object which was flung at him. He stared

down at a broken piece of piping, which curved at an elbow at the end.

Raph hissed and dropped it. It rang, loudly, dancing from end to end at his feet. He wiped his palm across his thigh as if the motion would rid him of memory of it's loathsome weight. But as he did so, the air shimmered before him and drew into a shape much like Leo's. Only this being seemed to be made of lighter fog. He looked up, fear glittering behind his own gold eyes, kneeling before Raphael with his hands bound behind his back.

"Miiiikey," Leo sang, sidling up to Raph's shoulder. "Hey, I don't blame you for that little pipe incident, Raph. The brat was asking for it." He frowned. "Then again, it was my idea..."

"No," Raph shook his head. "No, no, no. I didn' do it, Leo."

"Hey, I'm just trying to jar some memories into you," Leo said, placing his hands over his chest, innocently. "Anyways, if I remember correctly...you were stopped." Raph shook at the thought. He looked back to the other figure, seeing it all over in bright flashes. His foot connecting with Mikey's stomach, kicking him down, the red rage which swirled his vision as he hefted the pipe upward and took aim. Focusing past the hands which were raised against him to block the blow that would have crushed his younger brother's -

"If Leo's soooo good," the shadow whispered, "then what am I? What am I capable of?"

"Raphie..."

He looked up, startled to find that he had sunk to his knees. The creature that encompassed Mikey's voice smiled at him, sadly. "Don't listen to him, Raphie. Fight him off...you have to."

Don't lose yourself to him *, Donnie's voice filtered in from his left. Raph couldn't see anything, but the only image of his mellow brother he had left was far from reality. He didn't want to see Donnie grinning*

at him, twirling a scalpel. So his brother remained hidden, just a feeling pressed close to him. The others are coming, Raph. You have to hold out.

Leo snarled and swung his arm out, as if knocking both of them aside. He grabbed Raph by the arm and hauled him up. "They aren't coming. No one is. Don't you think it's possible that your precious Fearless is waiting for you to get yourself *out of a mess for once?"*

Raph swallowed, thickly. "Yeah..."

"Then stop listening to these idiots and do something." Leo swept down and lifted the pipe from the ground. "Or I'll finish what you've started." He glared down at Mikey. Drawing the pipe upward, across his chest, he swung it down in a sharp, lethal arc.

"MIKEY!" Raph screamed, his hoarse voice breaking.

He lunged forward, falling from the lotus position. He hit the floor, his legs and tail numb from holding the pose against the wall. His cheek pressed against the cool cement. His fist beat, weakly, before his beak as he mindlessly whispered to himself.

"Not Mikey...not Mikey...help me, help me, help me..."

Hey, Raphie , Mike's voice drifted behind him. It's okay. He can't really do anything. It's all right.

Gold eyes snapped open and he slammed his fist to the ground, pushing himself up. "No...it ain't, Mikey. It ain't okay...It's not..." He lunged to his prickly and tingling feet and, taking two steps, threw his shoulder into the steel door of his cell.

Raph, what are you doing? Donnie wondered.

"Gettin' out," he mumbled. "Gettin' out." He threw himself against it again, grunting as he struck. He landed, fell back a pace, and surged

forward again. And again. And again.

You're gonna hurt yourself!

He thought of rain. Cold rain striking him, propelled by an icy wind. He thought of running through it until every drop stung his skin. He let out a roar as the next impact drove through him.

Raphael!

He thought of the wild feeling of jumping over rooftops while thunder erupted overhead. His shoulder popped, loudly. He wanted to run. He wanted to be free. He had to get rid of this ceiling above him. He wanted the sky. He wanted rain. Rain could wake him up, clear his head, bring back the faces of his brothers. Of everyone. He landed, stumbled a bit, and stared at the steadfast door.

His scream of frustration shuddered the heavy blockade and pierced shrill through the speaker at the monitering station. The guard started, dropping his magazine and leaning in to watch the screens. He watched as the turtle snatched up his empty bathroom container and flung it against the door. The bucket dented beneath the force of the throw and then bounced back to strike him at his knees.

Raphael hissed, hiking up his leg as the sting of the metal bit at his skin. He spun, hooked his hands beneath the small bed frame and hurled it upwards. The bed cracked off the wall and slid down with a grating shriek, wedging itself at an angle in the limited space.

The turtle stood with his shoulders heaving for a moment. He turned and glared up at the camera. The guard flinched back as if the wicked look sent through the lens was intended for him personally. Then, the prisoner slumped. He sat down and slid himself into the dark little cubby which had been created by the bed's upheaval.

Once he finally had a shield against that relentless, staring eye, Raph curled himself against the wall. "Leo's righ'...I'm losin' it."

Well, how much did you really have it to begin with?

A tired smile tugged at his mouth. "Aw, shut-up, Mikey."

Leo's the one who lost it . Don said, gently. *C'mon, he's allowed himself to become what Karai wants him to be.*

"He's me..."

You know that's not true. You can't let her win, Raph. Don't let her take us away from you! If you start to believe her illusions -

"I ain't got nothin' ta hold on to...I can barely remember you guys, how ya really are...I need...I need somethin' ta help me." He twisted to see where his pillow had landed. Grabbing it, he found a familiar tear which lined the stitching and dug his finger into it. He pulled the fabric away from the ridiculously thin piece of foam and shook the interior out into the cell.

When nothing but the lining remained, he continued to tear the pillow into a rectangle. He turned it lengthwise and bit at the fabric until a new rip was started. He pulled a long strip away with a satisfying ripple as the threads tore beneath his hand. Looking down at the limp, white cloth, he nodded and set it aside.

What the hell is that?

His eyes fluttered, slightly, at Leo's reappearance. "It's gonna be Mikey."

Uh-huh. How, now?

The emerald shoulders lifted as he measured out the next one. "Mikey. He's...he's orange...yeah, he's orange and..."

Accused of thievery, conspiracy, and defence of the Utom enemy?

Raph stilled, closing his eyes, stubbornly. "Mikey...is *funny."* He nodded again, pleased. "Mikey is funny."

In your face, Leo.

Wow , Leo growled, unimpressed. **And how is this supposed to help you in any way at all?**

"Maybe that ain't none of yer damn business," Raph growled, continuing to work. "But it's gonna help. It's gonna work."

For now , Leo scoffed, smugly. When he didn't get a reaction, he faded into the dark and watched Raphael's movements, sullenly.

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* Sorry for all the recent italics and for my delay in updating. And sorry this is a little weird...ah, well. Creation of the anchors! Raph and Leo are going to get a little more into them next chapter. Reviews, please?

Amends

Disclaimer: TMNT does not belong to me in any way, shape, or form, but you know that...

A/N: Warning! Apparently, I have shifted into "softie" mode. I blame my 3 month old nephew (who I can now make smile and coo and kick, proving that yes, I am a cool aunt!) for all the brotherly fluff that's about to happen. There's a lot of it. Action will return in Chapter 17...

This was written in the zombie haze of working graveyard all week. I hope it's still okay!

Amends

"Be his brother. Be his brother. You've been doing it for fifteen years, just be his brother..."

Michelangelo froze, staring at the chipped and battered door which led into Raphael's bedroom.

Forget it! I can't do this!

He spun on his heel and began to sneak down the hall and would have made it to his own room, too, if Donatello had not chosen that moment to step out of the kitchen. He glanced upward and caught sight of his brother. Cocking his head, he asked, "Is there a problem, Mikey?"

He flinched, straightening from his "sneaky-burgler" crouch. "A problem? Who, me? No. I was just bringing Raph his dinner like sensei told me."

Donnie narrowed his eyes and made a spinning motion with his finger. "Then you might want to turn around."

"Oh, yeah, right." Mikey shot him a nonchalant grin and then grumbled his way back towards the imposing door. Refusing to chance a look into the living room and finding Donnie monitering his progress, he kept his momentum and blew past the boundary into his brother's territory before nerves could deter him.

He stopped. The door struck his carapace as it closed on him.

He remembered Leo turning off the light after they had all shuffled out of Raphael's room so he could really get some rest. Now, the overhead light, the lamps on his nightstand and desktop, and even two flashlights propped on his dresser, were all shining bright. Mikey squinted against the strain on his pupils (the flashlights were aimed towards the door), and lifted a hand to shield them. Raph was lying on the bed. He had kicked the covers to the floor and had buried his head beneath his lumpy pillow.

Why's he got all the lights on, then?

The question shot out of his head, though, when he noticed something else on the mattress with his brother. Held close to the turtle's chest by an emerald arm, orange paws were wrapped tightly about the thick wrist. Klunk was sleeping peacefully, his catty smile in place as he used Raph's palm as his own pillow.

"Hey, buddy, how'd you sneak in here?" Mikey said. He paused when he realized he was whispering. That wasn't right. This was Raphael's room. There was no whispering in here. It was a place of constant noise and distraction. In fact...Mikey snuck over to the dresser and clicked off the flashlights. He set them, bulbs down, to the side and began to shuffle through the collection of old pop cans and chip bags which cluttered the surface of the wood.

It was there somewhere, he knew it had to be. He caught sight of a small, white machine near the wall and pulled it forward. Checking the settings, he flicked it on and smiled when the room filled with the ancient, tinny imitation of falling rain. Nodding with satisfaction, Mikey drug Splinter's chair towards the bed.

He stroked a finger between the cat's ears. "Good ninja kitty, helpin' Uncle Raphie." Klunk tightened his grip on Raphael's arm and buried his nose into the wide palm. Mikey set himself down and propped his heels on the edge of the bed. He listened to the sound machine for a few minutes before an old tune suddenly struck him.

He hummed the first few bars, toyed with the words for a bit, and then worked his way through it, shaking his head when he stumbled off course. But by and by, a few lines fell into place and his humming suddenly broke into soft singing.

" *Sure, I'm glad it's raining. The gentle rhythm soothes the pain inside. I'm glad the stars aren't shining. A wounded warrior needs a place to hide.* " He glanced towards his brother, who had shifted his legs, then lifted his eyes towards the dark ceiling. " *I thought I had found someone I could count on till the end. What they wanted was a hero, all I needed was a* -"

"Mikey?"

"Ho, geez!" He lurched to the side, barely keeping himself on the chair and fighting to keep the contents of the bowl inside. The mixtured peaked dangerously close to the sides before settling. Mikey sighed and turned towards the bed. A gold eye glinted in the shadows beneath the pillow.

"Hey, Raph."

"What're ya singin' at me fer, ya creeper?"

Mikey offered him a weak smile. "I guess I didn't think I'd wake you."

"I wasn' sleepin'," Raph said, gruffly. He slid the pillow off his head and tried to rise, only to have Klunk's claws dig into his scaly skin in protest. Raphael look startled to find the cat next to him. Then his brow fell. He pulled his wrist free and gently pushed him away. Klunk gave a disgusted meow and hopped to the floor. He trotted to the door with his tail flicking with indignation.

"I was thinkin'," Raph continued as he pushed himself up.

Mikey brought his attention back from his slighted cat. "Oh, I get it...your body gave out in exhaustion from the effort, huh?"

Raph sighed. "What'cha doin' in here, Mike?"

Mikey, who had been expecting a rebuttal against the tease, was startled at the sting he felt at the question. It hadn't been asked in anger or annoyance. Not even real curiousity. It had been quiet. A simple request for information, nothing more. Raph's eyes were set a little beyond Mikey's left elbow.

"Oh, I...I brought you some dinner."

That perked his interest. He reached for the bowl, but his eagerness died when he found the only thing waiting for him was Splinter's broth. He swirled the spoon along the bottom and then lifted the utensil. He angled it towards his brother. "What is that?"

Mikey blinked and leaned forward. He had to squint, even in the bright room, to see the fine layer of powder still clinging to the metal. "That's something from LH. He said it would help your noggin." He tapped a finger off his own temple with a weak smile.

Raphael frowned at it. "From Leatherhead?"

"Yeah, man."

He nodded and then flicked the spoon away. It rang off the cement and went skittering into a messy corner, probably never to be seen again. Drawing the bowl to his mouth, Raphael took a few tentative swallows. When he lowered it, he wiped at his lower lip and gazed into the amber liquid with a worried look.

"What's wrong?" Mikey asked. He edged to the end of his seat. "Is it too cold? Too much broth? Did one of those herbal leaves not get

strained out? I warned sensei about those. Dude could choke to death on one of those sneak-attack leaves..."

"Mike," Raph said with a quiet grin, though he still did not look up. "It's perfect. I was jes...tryin' ta remember tha last time I had a hot meal. No big deal."

"Oh." Mikey leaned back. "Oh..."

He fell silent as Raphael continued working his way through the soup. He wasn't sure if Raph wanted him there since he hadn't fully looked at him once. But his brother also wasn't giving off any signals that indicated he wanted to be alone, either. So Mikey remained where he was, determined to stay with him this time around. He wasn't going to leave until asked. Even if it meant he had to sit still and be quiet, right? He was there to be supportive and encouraging and respectful to his brother until Raph got to a point that...

Wait.

Respectful? Him? Michelangelo Hamato? To *Raphael* ?

Not in this lifetime, buddy.

His own lightbulb clicked over his head and Mikey suddenly grinned as the full impact of his father's sneakiness hit him. He had to admit, he had been confused (and slightly terrified) at Splinter's insistance that he be the first to spend some one on one time with Raphael. After all, Leonardo was the morally superior brother who had all kinds of insights about one's identity and the perserverence over adversity and stuff. And it was no secret and Donnie had spent more than half his life acting as Raph's personal vent machine and therapist. Just at a glance, anyone would chose them over Mikey to try ease someone back into reality, wouldn't they?

Yet, as he thought about it, he realized that Leo's presence would still be tainted by what he had witnessed in Karai's warehouse. His fretting and worrying wouldn't be helping anyone, and would

probably annoy Raph further into his weird state than he already was. And Donnie still hadn't made it back onto the list of people Raph included in his own "circle of trust." While no one could question that they would have nothing but support when they did make into this room, the problem was that *Raph* wasn't ready for either of them.

However, Mikey had a talent which came only as a perk of being the youngest brother of four. He knew Raphael's buttons better than anyone. A talent neither Leo or Don would approve of, though, apparently, Splinter did. Because if there was anyone who could pull Raphael out of his own head, it was Michelangelo.

He sprang from the chair and dove across the foot of the bed. Raphael jerked in surprise, hefting the bowl above his head. "What the hell, Mikey?"

"So..." the other drawled, propping his chin onto the heel of his hand. "If that junk is Croc Doc and sensei approved, I'm going to guess that it's nasty, right?"

Raphael narrowed his eyes, suspciously. "I had worse."

"And you've had way *better* ," Mikey scoffed. "I know, being as I'm the one who's had to feed you culinary rejects all my life."

A spark flashed behind the dull gold. "I was talkin' ' *bout* yer cookin', bonehead."

"Ha." Mikey pushed himself so he was sitting cross-legged before the other. "So what can I sneak in here that will really make you feel better?"

Raph's strangely wary gaze regarded him. "Mike, I don'..."

"Do it," Mikey growled, gaining himself a startled look. He cocked his head with a smile. "Play the game, Raph. Or else I'm just going to

start bringing food in here to force feed you. Alphabetically, too, starting with..." He hesitated and looked aside.

Raph saw the wheels locked up in the youngest's brain. He lifted a shoulder, "Alfredo, maybe -"

"Alfredo of Doom!" Mikey bellowed, throwing a finger into the air. "This is a threat, dude! It's got to be epically scary. Like that chili we had a while back."

"That junk that made Leo sick for three days?"

"My doing," Mikey lifted his chin, proudly. "I brought down the mighty Leonardo with lowly beans and sauce. But it never touched us, huh?"

"Why would it?" Raph snorted, softly. "Ya got a steel stomach and me?" He waved his hand towards his own withered frame. "I'm a friggin' tank. Fact, I could go fer s'more that righ' 'bout now." He tipped the bowl to look at the bottom. "Or a cheeseburger...I've been thinkin' I could kill fer one 'a them. Or a hotdog. A real one from the stands up top, not one of them wimpy, store bought crap. Or pizza..."

"Really?" Mikey said, tipping his head with intrigue. Raph scoffed as if to say: *Is there any doubt?* Mikey laughed and rolled his finger for his brother to continue. Raphael clicked his fingernails off the plastic and slow, mischievously smile crept across his mouth.

"Actually, I been cravin' oatmeal fer the past few weeks...bran muffins. too..."

Horror filled the youngest turtle's face and he threw his palms upward. "Whoa! Nope, nada, cease!" He shook his head. "Are you serious? I'm drawing the line there, Raph. Right here, at *old man* food. Not happening! What next, you're going to ask me to just heat up some water for you to sip at? Iced prune juice, maybe? Not on my watch, mister!"

"Heh-heh-heh," Raph's shoulder's shook as his deeper laugh rolled across the room. Mikey had fixed him with his most unamused look, but it had broken in seconds and then he had dropped his head to stifle his own giggling. Raph sighed and ran a finger beneath his eye. He flicked away an imaginary tear.

"I missed ya, kid."

"Well, who wouldn't?" Mikey laughed as he rolled his head back towards his brother. Then he noticed that Raphael's smile didn't quite reach his eyes. An unfamiliar sadness still linguered upon his face. Mikey's throat tightened. "We missed you, too, Raphie-boy."

"Aw, c'mon," the older turtle snorted again. "Ya can' tell me Leo wasn' throwin' a friggin' party not havin' ta drag my ass home every nigh'."

It was Mikey's turn to lose his smile. "Dude, no...Leo's been going out of his head this whole time."

Raph blinked and scooted his shell higher against the wall. "Hey, I didn' mean..."

"We were out looking for you every night. I don't think Leo's really slept since you vanished and Donnie's been working himself into...No, forget *into* the ground. He's been like twenty feet below the surface for weeks." He shook his head. "It's definately *not* been a party."

"M'sorry, Mikey..." Raph muttered to his knees. "I'm sorry I did that ta ya guys..."

The younger brother sniffed. "You didn't, Raph. Karai did."

Gold eyes shot upward, meeting blue ones for the first time. Raph bared his teeth against her name and Mikey straightened, warily. Raph caught himself and shook his head, seeming to shrink back into his beaten frame. "Maybe..."

Mikey swallowed, painfully aware that he was sweating along his shoulder blades. What had that been about? A darker flush of embarrassment crept along Raph's neck as he returned his attention to his dinner and took a few drinks to brush aside his reaction. Mikey watched him, fearfully.

"You hate her, don't you, Raphie?"

Incredulity was shot at him from beneath a low brow.

"Not saying I would blame you if you did," Mike said quickly. He swallowed and fiddled with the sheet covering the mattress. "I hate her, dude, for what she did to you..."

"It ain't me..." Mikey glanced up in surprise. "I hate 'er, fer what she did ta Leo..."

"Leo?"

Raph shifted his glance to the nightstand, where his four little rags were resting. "Not Fearless, Mikey, I know he's okay." He tapped his head. "But the Leo in here? I can' shut 'im up, haven' been able to in weeks. He's lost it, Mike, off the deep end." Raph made a low whistle between his teeth and made a falling motion with his finger.

"What's he saying?"

Raphael looked at him and bit back his answer. Mikey cocked his head, worry filling his face.

"You're not going to do anything crazy, are you, Raph? We just got you back! I don't care what that nut in your head is saying, you are not going after her, right?"

Raph leaned forward and caught his wrist. He shook his head. "Ease up, kid, yer gonna give yerself a coronary. I ain't lookin' fer revenge. I, uh, had a conversation with Mistress 'bout vengeance," he cleared his throat, not noticing how Mikey flinched to hear that name come

from his mouth. "I ain't interested in it. It's...personal crap I'm dealin' with..."

"About Leo?"

"Leo's...involved, yeah." He sighed. "I know what's in here ain't the real him, Mikey. I know what Fearless did fer me..." His eyes widened. "I didn' even thank 'im fer it..."

Mikey inched his way closer. "Do you want to?" Raph looked doubtful. "Look, LH said your head's going to start clearing up and you'll get that nasty version of Leo out of there. So why don't you kick his butt to the curb right now? What better way than spending some time with the real deal, right?"

Raphael hesitated and looked to the door. "Yeah, maybe yer right..."

"So you want me to get him?"

Raphael tipped his head back in affirmation and then winced as a green and orange blur shot from his bed.

"LEEEEOOOOOO!"

Raph smirked and shook his head after his brother. He glanced to the strips on his bed and his grin died. Somewhere between his lungs, he felt that familiar chunk of ice shift.

Uh-oh, Raphie "Leo" sneered. **Somebody's pants are on fi-i-re...**

Donatello stood at the entrance to the dojo for a while, his fist poised to announce himself. Instead, he merely watched the fluid motion of the leader executing one of his katas. Leo blew out a breath as he poised for a beat before rolling into the next movement. His sword flashed in the dim light offered from the living room. His eyes were blocked. He had turned his bandana to the side, as seemed to be his

preference ever since the Foot had hunted him through the streets above so many months ago.

"Can I help you, Don?"

He jerked out of his thoughts, silently wondering how Leo *did* that in house full of ninjas. Leo's head tipped his way and he hooked his pinky finger beneath the lip of his mask. He pulled the fabric upward until one amused black eye was exposed. The second he caught the inventor's expression, however, he straightened and pushed the mask higher on his forehead. Worry etched across his face.

"Everything's fine," Donnie said, stepping into the room. "Mikey's in with Raph and sensei's getting himself something to eat before he turns in for the night."

"Did *you* need something, Donnie?"

He started. "Me?"

"Yeah." The leader smirked as he sheathed his sword. "Did you need me?"

Donnie hesitated and glanced towards the living room. "Oh, I, uh...yeah, I'm fine. I just..." He sighed. "I just wanted to let you know." His hand flopped, pathetically, at his side.

Leo's eyes flicked aside and then back, confused. "Okay. Thanks."

Crickets.

"So, I'll leave you to it, then..." Don forced an overly bright smile and turned away feeling like the lowliest coward to ever crawl across the earth. What kind of a jerk couldn't summon up the guts to apologize for punching his older brother in the face? Repeatedly?

He stopped at the door and drove the side of his fist into the frame. "Actually, Leo...I wanted to talk to you."

"Oh?"

Donnie turned back. "Yeah. About what happened the other night."

Leo's normally nerveless features flickered with panic. Fantastic, he didn't want to broach the matter either. "Donnie, that...Look, it was a bad night. We're brothers, we're bound to have them, right? No harm done."

"Sensei seems to think we need to talk about it."

Leo tensed again, caught between wanting to do anything *but* talk about it and risking being in direct violation of his father's wishes if he didn't. "Ah."

More crickets.

This was exactly why Donnie tried to avoid conflicts with his brothers. Cleaning up the aftermath sucked.

"So, I'm sorry, Leo."

Leo shifted, scrubbing at the practice matt beneath him with a toe. "Well, I was the one who threw the first punch, so...everything was rightly deserved. No harm done, like I said."

"Right."

"Right."

Holy cow, Donnie thought, this is the worst talk-out ever! Weren't they supposed to declare their innermost regrets and feelings to one another? Beg each other for forgiveness? Explain what they were going through at the moment their usually strong bond fractured? Hug things out and promise never to let things get so bad again?

He shuddered at the thought, deciding he'd live through this awkward silence thing a thousand times over rather than have to

face *that* scenario. Leo said they were fine, right? That meant this was done? Good, great, wonderful...How did he get out of it?

Nobody ever discussed the escape route following uncomfortable conversations. Why? It seemed a tad crucial in their current circumstance.

That's when an unexpected angel of mercy spared them both.

"LEEEEOOOO!"

Mikey came bounding into the room a second later, side-stepping Donnie and all but barrelling into the leader's chest. Leo stepped back, cocking his head. "Hey, Mikey..."

"C'mon! C'monc'monc'mon!" the younger brother grabbed his wrist and started hauling him towards the living room. "Raph wants to talk to you, man, move your feet!"

Leo snapped to attention at that. "What? What's happened? Is he okay?"

"Well, I think so, I don't really know. He seemed okay and I got him laughing and it was all good. But now he wants to talk to you, pronto!" He disappeared from the dojo. Leo started after him and then hesitated, shooting an uncertain look towards the inventor.

Donnie waved a hand. "Go on, Leo. We're good, I swear." Leo nodded and started towards the stairs, but as he did so, something deep within Donnie twisted with guilt. He felt like he was watching his chance to salvage what was left between them slip away. If they were so fine with each other, then why did if feel so unfinished?

"Leo!"

The leader turned back, cocking his head.

Donnie shot a look towards the second story, debating whether or not what was on the tip of his tongue was worth it delaying Leo from

Raphael's need. He naturally felt the urge to retreat, put his issues aside in lieu of everything that was going on at the moment. It was what he normally di, after all.

Instead, he asked. "Um, later tonight, y'know...do you think you might need a sparring partner?"

Leo's dark eyes flicked between his for a moment. Then the first real smile Donatello had seen in over three months spread across his face. Leonardo dipped his chin in a sharp nod, his teeth flashing in approval.

"Always."

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* I lied, I said I would get to Raph and Leo really discussing the anchors...but it was just too much mushy stuff for one sitting! Can't do it! The song Mikey sang is from "Ernest Goes to Camp" ~ it's a really pretty song, if you're eyebrows just shot up, honestly!

**Only four chapters left, guys...and just to prove I haven't completely sapped out for this story, I'll leave you with Chap 17's Title as a teaser: "Leo" Makes His Move. Critiques and suggestions and questions which need still need answering are all appreciated!

Leo Makes a Move

* **Disclaimer** : I've said it before and I'll say it again...I don't own TMNT...but what if I did? Ooooh…

A/N: **Peeks around the corner** Hee, hee, hee...this story is still lurking around...though I've spent some time cussing it out for not playing right...a lot of time actually...and I'm still debating if it's too disconnected, or not disconnected enough, or just right…regular ol' Goldilocks conundrum happening here…(which I also don't own!) Blood/language warning!

"Leo" Makes A Move

The light swung back and forth, casting shadows from side to side. The flurry of movement was nauseating and Raphael dropped his head as a wheeze slid past his teeth. His sides quivered, sending sharp barbs towards his spine.

The Foot soldier had struck the low-hanging light fixture in his attempt to deal the turtle a devastating blow. Raphael managed to block it with his own katana, but the swinging bulb had seared his vision and he stumbled in the following disorientation. A burst of pain met his mouth, jamming his neck into the top rip of his shell. His sword slid away from him with a metallic shriek as he caught himself on his knee, panting.

Huh. Red spots littered the floor beneath him. He blinked, baffled for a moment at where they had come from. Shimmering heat rose up his thigh from where his knee had taken the brunt of his weight. The arm he had thrown down to support himself was trembling. Dull beats could still be felt where the none-too-gentle syringe had plunged into his elbow. He shook his head and tried to focus on the wet dots before him.

His tongue moved forward to wet his lips and he was startled when a fresh spattering joined the rest. Thick warmth filled his mouth and slipped over the edge of his lower lip. A sluggish hand rose to wipe across his beak. He gaped down at the wide smear of maroon which spread from his first knuckle to the curve of his emerald wrist.

Red on green.

Huh.

Leo's smug voice slithered from behind his ear. **That means something, doesn't it, little brother?**

Did it?

Movement came from his left and he barely had time to lift his eyes before a boot connected with his cheekbone. The cement bit at his knee as he twisted with the blow and went down. The grate of his plastron against the floor shivered through his teeth and spine. His eyes took in a ring of grayish-black boots circling him and then noise crashed upon him with brutal force.

The gathered soldiers were cheering on their companion, the sharp claps and intermingling voices wreaking havoc among his thoughts. He winced and dropped his chin to shield his ears.

The cement was cool against his stinging face.

You're not cowering right now, are you?

"Be careful with that!" a deep, booming voice rose above the rest. "She'll have your head!"

"I was told not to hold back," Raph's opponent said. His footsteps drew closer. "I fully intend..."

Why aren't you getting up?

His hands slid beneath him and he pushed his chest off the floor. A soft curse was slurred towards the floor. He opened his mouth wide and scrunched the bridge of his beak a few times.

Superficial. You'll live.

A string of mucus and blood joined the rest of the mess. His eyes rose higher up the circle around him, taking in the uniforms of the Foot. Blank masks gazed down at him, a few dozen of them. Half were sweaty and breathless from the hours it had taken to wear him to this point.

The other half were fresh and eager for a chance at the enemy.

Which was just peachy, wasn't it?

"...what I was told to fear?" the current victor crowed.

"You'll know what to fear if you don't get away from it!" the deeper voice warned. One of the taller figures stepped forward with the threat, squaring his shoulders.

Ooooh, lookie-here. A manager.

"Mistress Karai commands he not be damaged."

Why won't the light stop swinging?

"...scared of some dumb animal?"

Leo hissed, venomously. A rough, guttural noise bubbled at the back of Raph's throat.

"James, I'm warning you. Get. Away. From it."

His arms shook, violently, as he pushed himself to his knees. Soft footfalls drew closer, a swagger in their rhythm. Saliva flecked past his lips as he raised his head. Dull gold bore into the meshed fabric of the man's mask. The human cocked his head, curiously.

Hmm, is he ballsy or just plain stupid? Leo's voice wondered. A slight smile tugged at Raph's mouth.

The soldier reached up to pull the mask over his head. A mop of sandy brown hair fell in sweaty curls. He was young, maybe a few years older than Raphael himself, for a Foot. His eyes had the glassy eagerness of a newbie trying to prove himself.

"Dammit, James!" the older man strode forward, shoving the others back from the spectacle.

Human and turtle glared at one another for an endless moment. James smirked and glanced to the fuming leader before his heel slammed into Raph's shoulder, flipping him to his back. The turtle continued the roll and pushed himself to his elbows, moaning against the onslaught of dizziness that crashed into his head. His fist thumped the cement.

James laughed at his companions and circled around to stand before Raphael. He sank to his haunches and leaned close. "James Courten. I thought you'd like to know who it was that finally put you in your place, *freak* ."

A low thrum of delight tickled the back of his mind. **Stupid it is…**

Raph smirked up at the boy.

Raph, don't! Donnie cried. Too far away.

Take that smile off his face, Raphie-boy.

James frowned at the slightly glazed-over look he was receiving. He reached forward to prod his finger between the mutant's eyes. "Hey, dumbass, you smart enough to underst –"

In a dark blur, Raph's palm closed about the thinner wrist.

James let out a shriek, jerking back in reflex. But Raph's grip didn't falter, so he ended up sliding to his rear with his feet kicking,

desperately, for traction. Raphael rolled to his knees, rising above the man with fury dancing behind his eyes. He lunged forward, yanking the soldier closer. The snap of his teeth rang through the stunned silence.

Breath shivering, James found himself staring into white incisors traced in red. Raphael glared down at him with his upper lip curled back into a wicked snarl.

His arrogance wiped away, the young man lashed out, wildly. Raph ducked the blow and twisted behind him. He shoved the punk's wrist high between his shoulder blades. James let out a terrified cry. His dark eyes swiveled around to meet savage gold.

Raphael's brow fell and the wrist was tugged sharply upward, creating a dull pop deep inside the boy's shoulder. James screamed again.

Raph released him, but not quickly enough to escape the cavalry. Hands fell upon his carapace and he was yanked back. A fist met his jaw and then a blast of white burned from the back of his skull. Vertigo overtook him and he sank to the floor, clutching at his seeping and clouded head.

Hey, there's my boy… Leo chuckled.

The lead Foot hauled the solider to his feet and gave him a shake. "I warned you, fool!" He shoved him towards the door. "Get yourself to the medical bay now!"

James staggered from the push. Shaking and swallowing down his pain, he looked around at his companions, who were all carefully engaged elsewhere. Red blotches grew across his neck and cheeks. Raphael was the only one not interested in him at all, trying to regain his senses as he shook his head and fought to stay upright. The blotches deepened in color.

He began towards the door, sniffing back his misery and the pain consuming his neck and arm. He sucked at his tongue as he limped, closing the gap between himself and the turtle. And as he passed the prisoner, he spit at the back of his neck.

Raph felt the wetness strike and glanced up. James pushed through the loose ring of soldiers and made his way towards the stairs at the back of the room. His footsteps, not yet trained for silence, gave a soft clunk with every step he ascended. His frame faded into the basement's gloomy –

Raph's head jerked up, eyes widening.

Ascending?

Holy crap, the door…

The door was going to open.

"He's lucky to be alive," the leader growled, storming back and forth in rage. "Impetuous little…we're done here! Somebody take this filth back to its cage!"

A gloved hand touched his shoulder and Raphael struck. He twisted towards the soldier and brought his fist hurtling upward with such ferocity and speed that he hadn't known he still possessed. Thick knuckles cracked off the underside of the man's jaw and took him clean off his feet.

Raphael lunged up, staggering as his weight pitched forward. He blew past the startled Foot and bolted after James' receding footsteps. His own feet touched the first step just as light erupted from the door at the top. It blinded him, but he surged up them, wheezing.

The noise alerted the man above him and James turned on the top step. His confusion melted into terror as he saw what was coming after him. Later, Raph gave him brownie points for not pissing

himself on the spot. Bloodied, wild-eyed, and rising from the darkness (a basement no less) the sight of him would have been enough to turn anyone's legs to jelly.

James managed to maneuver his way around the door and attempted to slam it. Raph let out a roar, dropped his shoulder and threw all of his weight into that thin barrier.

The door burst open with a thundering crack as the rim of the turtle's carapace struck the wood. James was thrown back against the wall, fresh agony jolting down his spine. But he never got the chance to express the pain as Raphael's momentum carried him on. He slammed into the soldier as well. James let out a squeak and slid to the floor as Raph hauled himself upright.

He spun, dazed, on his heels as voices rose from the stairway. The hall he found himself in looked the same in both directions. He took off left, bouncing from wall to wall as the floor kept leaning on him. He panted, cold air sucking through his sinuses as he fled down the gray tiles.

Go, Raph, go, Raph, go, Raph!

A set of double doors to the right. The balls of his feet slapped on the linoleum as he slowed enough to turn into them. Once again, his shoulder met wood and he stumbled out into…

He swore.

A gray hall, non-descript, stretching to the left and the right.

The Foot were behind him, closing in. He went right this time, blowing past door after door. No windows, no exit signs, no arrows pointing out the escape route. Nothing but a line of overhead lights and gray tiles. He ran, pushing down the panic and fog. His right hand swept over the wall, keeping him somewhat steady as he made for the end of the building. There had to be something there. A set of

stairs. An elevator. How the hell would they have gotten him down here?

Another door, leading left. He yanked it open, shot down a short alcove and turned at an opening.

A gray hall, non-descript, stretching before him.

He let out a bellow, slamming his fist into the wall.

What is this? A freaking fun house?

He flinched at a pinch in his shoulder. Looking down, he let out a darker curse and yanked the dart from his bicep. A thin soldier stood in the last doorway, his gun shaking as he lowered it. Raph lifted his lip and took a step towards him. The Foot fled, hollering to the others.

The dart's casing broke at Raph's feet, tiny shards tinkling away as he moved on. Slower now, more haphazard. Soon, it wasn't his hand guiding his balance, but his shoulder. Frustration trembled through his jaw as he kept walking. The hall swiveled before him, blurring and twisting in a sickening undulation.

"No, no, no, no, no, *damn-it* , no…." he hissed as he stopped, breathing deep to keep the nausea away.

Keep going!

"I-I-I…"

Raph ! Leo bellowed. **Get your ass moving!**

"I can't…I can't frick…frickin'…"

He looked back, seeing a wave of gray and black uniforms hurtling down the hall. His shoulders slumped.

"Leo, I can't…"

The voice that answered was cold and eager, not even a shred of Leonardo remaining in it. **Then let me.**

They were coming. They were going to take him back and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He sank to his knees as despair washed over him. They were coming.

You can't give up! Donnie wailed.

Raphie!

"Help…Leo…"

Footsteps thundered all about him. The chunk of ice within his chest erupted, sending shivering jolts through him. Raphael looked up, his vision rimmed in red. His pupils dilated and then shrank into pinpricks. A familiar surge of black rage swelled in his chest before the tranquilizer pulled him under.

He heard a distant scream.

Then, he was standing in a dark and empty street. Moonlight filtered along the cars, shining silver. Before him was a manhole which led into the sewers which was his home.

The cover was blown off.

He leapt into the darkness.

Water sloshed within the steel bowl as Karai entered the cell. Her eyes scanned the devastation Raphael had inflicted upon his bed and then slid her gaze to the right where he sat against the wall. His head was leaned back with his forearms resting upon his knees. Glassy eyes were fixed half-way up the adjoining wall.

Whatever hellfire had spurred the afternoon's events, she supposed it must have burned itself out.

Or else it had been sated in the violence.

She couldn't tell, by the look of him, how much blood was actually his. She wasn't entirely sure she wanted to know, either.

Lowering herself to one knee, she set the bowl down and nudged it towards him until it touched his knee. Raphael's eyes flicked towards it. Dried flakes broke from the curves of his neck, revealing green flesh beneath.

"I want you to wash off, Raphael." She took a cloth from her back pocket and dropped it into the water. Raph watched as the color darkened and it sank to the bottom of the bowl. He pushed himself straight and reached for it, rolling the warmth over his hands a few times before moving to scrub the cloth along his arms.

Karai observed his slow actions for a moment, the slight smile that appeared at the chance to dip his bloodied fingers into fresh, hot water, how he curled over it to absorb what heat he might, and the rhythmic way the fabric erased the evidence of his actions and tinted the liquid in the bowl a light pink.

"I don't appreciate bad news while conducting my legitimate business, Raphael."

He didn't seem to hear her.

"Receiving an envelope containing seven incident reports makes it difficult to concentrate on my work, you understand?" When he didn't answer, she pressed on. "It will take much to compensate the broken bones, concussions, and *bites* covering my men. Not to mention the nasty business you dealt with that tanto."

He moved on to his face, wiping a clean path across his cheek and scrubbing at his nostrils.

"Fortunately, there were no casualties," Karai muttered to herself. She pursed her lips, thoughtfully and set her hip against the wall,

"Does that ease your mind? Or does it only reinforce that your little stunt was completely futile?"

His hands paused, the cloth pressed over his chest plate.

Her smile spread. "You truly believed you could escape at this point?" She nodded towards the emaciated muscle which lined his upper arm. "No, Raphael. Your only hope of leaving this place is *my* good grace. And it is quite thin after the day you've caused me."

His lower jaw eased forward and he stretched his mouth as he went back to cleaning himself.

Her eyes narrowed and she looked away to keep her frustration from rising. Her eyes scanned over the demolished bed and the little hole he was now using as a sanctuary. She frowned at four dirty strips which were carefully hung over one of the upended bed posts.

Reaching out, she took the end of one and pulled it off the post. It caught it's neighbor and sent it fluttering to the floor. A distraught grunt shot her gaze back to her prisoner. Raphael was looking between the strip she held and the one crumpled on the floor. A thick and nervous swallow convulsed his throat.

She lifted her brow. "What is this, Raphael?"

He hesitated before lowering his head. "Leo…"

"Leonardo?"

"It's Leo…"

Karai took two steps to him and eased to her haunches. She lifted the cloth between them and gave him a cruel little smile. "Tell me, how is *this* Leonardo?"

A muscle in his cheek pulled and his pupils contracted a bit before returning to their normal size. His shoulders caved. "You said Leo's

tha worst'a us?" He wrung out the cloth above the bowl, churning the water a deeper shade.

"But Leo's good…Leo's s'pposed ta be…He don' do this…"

She frowned and rubbed the cloth between her thumb and index finger.

"Who does?"

He looked up, confused.

"Raphael, who *does* inflict this type of damage?"

His eyes, dull and weary gold, shifted between hers.

"I can' remember…"

** We're so close to the end, you can't hold out your thoughts now, right?

ReAlliance Part 1

Disclaimer : There's no ownage on my part, but you knew that...

* A/N: I know it's incredibly late...my apologies to everyone. But I hope you like this next installment...Leo and Raph finally have their talk.

Re-Alliance Part 1

Leonardo's initial reaction, much as Mikey's had been, was to marvel at the sheer amount of light radiating through Raphael's small bedroom. Blinking to ease the ache behind his eyes, he scanned the empty room before shuffling drew his attention towards the closet.

The bare bulb inside was shining, offering what piddily light it could to the rest.

"Raph?"

He got no answer, but the shuffling continued.

Leo hesitated, wondering if he should try again later, when movement caught his eye. Raph's hammock was swaying, lazily, above the donated bed. Assuming his brother had used it to haul himself up, Leo closed the door behind him and crossed the floor. He reached out, halting the steady rhythm.

His thumb moved over the braided strands with a thoughtful smile. He looked over the ropes which usually supported his brother's weight and then let his gaze drift beyond the loose cords.

His stomach tightened.

Lying framed against the faded blue sheets of Mikey's mattress, was the entangled ball of Raphael's anchors. Leo hesitated and then ducked beneath the hammock, sinking onto the bed as he lifted

them. Trailing ends brushed his wrists as he turned the bundle over and over.

He didn't notice when exactly his inspection became something more productive. But he found himself working at the tangles, tugging knots loose and threading the frayed pieces through one another until one strip was freed. It fell across his knee.

The dark folds of his kneepad could be seen through the tattered fabric. He set the others aside and lifted the single before his beak. His fingers moved along the frayed edges, watching as the worn sides rose and fell. Frowning, he couldn't help but wonder how such an insignificant piece of cloth could hold such sway over his brother's...

He froze, dark eyes widening.

Rising from the stained threads was the smell.

Stale urine. Old waste. The remaining traces of sweat and burned flesh. All saturated by the condensed and oppressive tang of despair.

In a single breath, everything he and his family had been through in the past two days shattered about his feet. He wasn't sitting in his brother's room, but facing down a steel door. He wasn't safe and sound in the lair, he was standing in an abandoned warehouse with heat slicing the side of his neck where a katana had nipped his skin. Damp air chilled him. The hollow knot of fear in his gut twisted. His ears buzzed with the moans of the men he'd taken down.

At the time he had not noticed, but the stink had been burning his nostrils long before the cell door opened.

He shook his head, eyeing the inconspicous strip with new suspicion. He didn't like the idea of having a reminder of that place anywhere near his brother, no matter how much he might have depended on them. Wasn't it bad enough that Raph had had to

endure that stench throughout his captivity? Did it really have to follow him back here, too -

"It's Mikey."

He started, jerking his wrist across his beak to clear his thoughts, and looked up.

Raphael had dug his spare gear from the depths of the closet. Now, he stood, fully clothed and fully exposed, beneath the harsh lighting.

Atrophied muscles cast strange shadows down his neck and arms. The pads adorning his elbows and knees were sagging lower than they should. The one thing that still fit properly was his mask. Though, having gone so long without, it's presence only seemed to hightlight the apprehension which dragged his gaze to the floor.

His shoulders hitched beneath the leader's scrutiny. As if he thought the tiny movement might restore some of his bulk.

Leo, realizing he had been staring, quickly forced his mouth into a grin. "Hey, you're up."

Raph tilted his head, brushing the statement aside. Accepting the silence, Leo waited a few beats before pushing himself from his seat. Raphael instantly fell back a step; the upper row of his teeth revealed in slight grimace.

Leo paused at that. Once it had faded, he cleared his throat. "So, um...you wanted to talk with me?"

Both his heart and his smile sank as Raphael lifted his shoulders, indifferently.

"Mikey said ta."

Leo was taken aback. Not only by the absurdity of Raphael following through with an order (issued by *Mikey* , no less), but also at the sharp pain that sliced over his chest at the words.

"Oh. So you..." Leo grunted deep in his throat. "You never wanted to..."

Raphael kept his eyes downcast, though his mouth tugged to the side, apologetically. His thumbs brushed over his index fingers in restless strokes.

Leo's eyes sharpened.

It was a gesture from childhood, when roughhousing had led to injury or one of their few possessions being destroyed. Standing in the habitual lineup, while their father deliberated on appropriate punishment, Leonardo would look down and catch the small display of Raphael's nerves. No matter how stoic or angry his face might appear, his hands had never lied.

To see it expressed now sent spiked slivers of ice through the leader's veins.

His brother was waiting for him to explode on him. Well, maybe not Leonardo, per se, but certainly that vile and twisted persona which haunted his mind. Twin lines of fury snaked down the leader's neck at the realization.

This is was Karai had wanted.

You don't deserve my pain. So I gave you another.

Like the stink clinging to Raphael's anchors, so her slow and measured words lingered in his mind. And it churned his stomach to hear them again.

She didn't want them dead. Maybe before, when she had brought their old lair down around them, yes. But not now. After all, what peace had their supposed deaths brought her, really? Had Shredder been spared from his icy prison? Had it brought any solace to her suffering?

No.

But by torturing one, she had broken her enemies. She had infected her pain into the soul of their family by filling brazen Raphael's eyes with fear.

Fear of his father's rejection.

Fear of his leader's fury.

Fear of his brother's betrayal.

It is your choice how you will bear it.

His choice.

He had made choices which helped bring down the Shredder. He'd done what he could from allowing the daughter to reach her father's level of success. He had chosen to assault Foot Tower even after he had threatened Karai with death if she sought them out again. Himself, Mikey, and Raph had humiliated her in her own stronghold, on Bishop's order, to save Donatello.

He had made the choice to bring Raph home before she could obliterate what remained of him. And he sure as hell wasn't about to allow the guilt she'd planted within his brother finish the job for her.

He strode across the small space, ignoring the tension which swept through the other at his approach. The taller brother winced when Leo took his chin between a gentle thumb and finger.

"Raph," he said, "I want you to look at me."

Raphael only snapped his eyes shut. "Nah, Leo. M-Mistress said -"

" *Karai* isn't here," Leo growled. "She can't control you. She doesn't have that authority."

He let the words settle between them and sighed when Raph's brow crumpled.

"Y-yeah. She does..."

Leo's eyes flashed. "Okay...Okay, maybe she *did* back there. When she had you drugged and weak and outnumbered. But not now, Raph. Not here."

Raph's eyes closed tighter.

"Leo...ya don' know..."

"I know the strength of my brother. I know you can look me in the eye."

Raphael's palm closed about his wrist, mildly. "But wha' if I don' wanna?"

Leo blinked at that. "Why wouldn't you?"

The darker throat worked in silence for a long moment. To the point that Leo wondered if he would get a reply. It came, all right, in a broken, wavery words so unlike his volatile brother.

"Cuz I can' see ya hate me anymore..."

Leo sucked in a breath. "No one hates you."

Raphael huffed, softly. "Don' lie, Leo. Ya hate that I caved. That I call 'er what I call 'er. That I couldn' get out..."

"Raph -"

"I *tried* !" he barked, clenching his hands into trembling fists. "Don'cha think I tried? I jes...I jes couldn'. An' I didn' know what ta do anymore. I didn' know wha'cha wanted me ta do!" He shook his head, attempting to break free, but Leo only tightened his grip. "I jes wanted ta come home."

Leo grit his teeth against the sting in his eyes. "I know you did, Raph. I know you held out as long as you could. We just weren't fast enough."

Raphael pante, his knuckles whitening before falling loose at his sides.

"But you beat her this time. You escaped and she can't get to you anymore, do you know that?" When he didn't get a response, he finally released his brother's chin, allowing his head to fall again just so he could set both hands upon the wide shoulders.

"She thought she could break you, little brother," he whispered, fiercely. "Only she *didn't.* Look, you're standing here now. I can see that. All I want is for you to see it, too. That's why I need you to look at me."

They stood in rigid silence nearly a minute before the emaciated turtle sighed in defeat. His lower lip trembled, unbidden and unwanted, as his eyes finally cracked open and focused on the top rim of Leo's plastron. With a harsh sniff, he worked his way up and up until wary gold met misted black.

Leo smiled. "Hey, bro."

Raphael's gaze fluttered between the leader's eyes and his face fell when he only found stubborn affection there. No anger. No disdain. No soul-piercing taunts. Simply Leonardo's forgotten dark eyes.

"H-hey."

Leo let out a small laugh. Cupping his brother around the back of his skull, he brought their foreheads together.

"Welcome back."

Raphael released a shaken breath, allowing his shoulders to slump towards his brother. But a second later, he slid the back of his hand

against Leo's chest and pushed away. He swiped a knuckle across his beak.

"Th...heh, t'anks fer bringin' me back," he muttered.

Leo grinned. Shifting his weight, he lifted the filthy rag still clutched in his hand.

"So. Mikey, huh?"

Raph's jaw twitched, hesitant. "Yeah. That one's Mike."

Leo looked the cloth over with more care now that its owner was present for the study. But in the end, he shook his head and offered it to his brother.

"I don't understand."

Raphael made no move to take it. Leo shook his head again. "I don't understand how *this* could be Mikey." When his brother only continued to stare down at it, he bit his lip. "If you don't want to tell me, that's okay, too -"

"Is goofy."

Leo's head came up. Reaching forward, Raph lefted one of the ends. "Look, see how it's all funny lookin' here at tha top? It took a while ta get the tear goin'." Leo took in the frayed corner as Raph shrugged, uneasily. "It's lame, but whenever I looked at it...I dunno, it was like it-it was easier to remember Mikey. Ta think abou' 'im still bein' out here. Ta remember 'im bein' funny."

He chanced a glance for approval, but now Leo was the one staring at the strip in silence. Raph dropped his end and pushed past his brother, headed for the bed.

"D-Don's was harder. Cuz I didn' like ta...I mean, I was havin trouble thinkin' how he looked aft'a he, uh..." His fingers scratched at his chest plates, thoughtfully. "Yeah, an' plus I messed it up." He swiftly

disentangled another long cloth. Pulling it open, he revealed a jagged line that bit into the body of the fabric. "My hand slipped. I felt bad 'bout it fer a while. But, if ya really get ta lookin' at it, ya start ta see how it's a little crooked. Like how Don starts ta grinnin' when he gets nervous?"

Leo saw nothing remotely similar, but he nodded all the same.

"Yers is best, though."

His stomach gave a jolt.

Raph didn't seem to notice as he handed Donnie's strip over. He pulled the final two apart. One fluttered back to the bed as Raph turned, holding the other almost reverently. Leo eyed the anchor. His insides churned.

"See how straight tha sides ended up? Like yer katana, huh?"

Leo crossed a finger over his mouth, praying he could keep the shiver out of his breath. He couldn't bear the image of Raphael sitting in that cage, diligently focused on ensuring that this particular cloth would be as perfect as he could manage.

He thought of the arrogance that gleamed from his brother's eyes when they'd confronted each other in the dojo. He thought of the sneering superiority and frigid words that were meant to be his own.

Hello, Leo , he smirked, bitterly.

"Leo?"

"Yeah, Raph," he muttered. "I see it."

He missed the smile that broke across the weary turtle's face. Instead, he looked to the abandoned anchor still upon the bed. This one, if possible, seemed just a bit cleaner, less worn. Raphael followed his gaze.

"Yeah, I kinda half-assed that one. Don' even know why I did it..."

Leo took it, running his fingers down the seam which had once held the pillow together. Made with the least care, perhaps, but with the raised edge, Leo thought it was the easiest to recognize.

"Pry didn' need it," Raph finished, scratching at his arm."It jes felt wrong not ta four."

Leo spread the three over his hands. "When I first saw you with them...when Karai was in with you, I thought maybe you were seeing our masks."

"Wha?" Raph snorted. "Ya though' I was seein' colors tha' weren't there?"

Leo glanced up at the incredulity in his voice. Like that idea was more ridiculous than the fact that he'd spent the past two days impersonating each of his brothers. "Yeah, I guess."

"Karai's colorblind, Fearless," Raph said, stepping back with a scoff. "Our masks ain't never been a part of it."

Leo frowned at him, but Raph gave no indication to delve further into the matter. He let it go.

"But, if you can tell them apart this way," he pointed to the tear in Donnie's strip. "How did I always end up being the last one you would answer for when she asked -?"

The other's face fell. He clicked his teeth as he contemplated.

"Karai found out 'bout 'em," he said at last. "They were pry a dumb idea, Fearless. Jes gave 'er another way ta git und'a my skin. But she nev'a could tell 'em apart." He smirked. "That was the one thing I had on 'er. I wasn' gonna be givin' it up."

"Okay?" Leo said slowly.

"I switched 'em up much as I could. But yers." Raph sighed, turning up his palms. "I didn't wanna *say* it, Leo. I didn' wanna say the things she wanted 'bout ya. I could remember tha' she was lyin' 'bout Mike and maybe Donnie, but...aft'a a while..."

"You could believe it of me?"

Shame drew back his brother's lip.

Leo swallowed, thickly, taking an step towards his brother. But Raphael tensed again and he stopped, looking towards the bed instead. "Well, that's...that's fine, Raph. You were just doing what you had to do."

Raph lifted his head, scouring the opposite wall. "Ya think?" he asked, gruffly.

"Yeah, I do."

Raph's brow furrowed. He lowered his attention to the straight edged anchor still in his hand.

"So, when d'ya think I can star' trainin' again?"

Leo spun towards him. " *What* ?"

"Ya know, if...if Masta will still work wit' me."

The older brother's frown deepened. "Why wouldn't he?"

Raph didn't reply. His eyes darkened at the bricks as his hand rose, thoughtlessly, to rub at the scorched skin at his temple. Leo closed the distance between them, reaching out to take his wrist.

"Raph?"

He blinked and slowly look back at him.

"Why wouldn't father train you?"

Raph glanced at his hand suspended between them and quickly dropped it. "Nah, yeah," he shrugged. "'Course he will, Fearless. Jes thinkin' out loud. Yer righ', yer righ'."

Leo drew back. "Raph, I haven't said anything about it."

A muscle jerked along the emerald jaw. They stared at one another. Then Raphael stepped back with an uneasy laugh. "Yeah? Tha' embarassin', heh? Been und'a a damn light s'long I don' know how ta be in tha dark." He pointed towards the ceiling. "An' now I'm jumpin' ahead in conversations...that's uh," he tipped his head. "Tha's weird, huh?"

"Yeah," Leo said, his eyes narrowing at the strip still clutched in his brother's fingers. "Weird."

"So, when d'ya think, Leo?"

The leader rolled his focus back to his brother. "I can ask. But he's going to insist you have longer than a two day rest. And you'll start out slow, painfully slow if you push him about it."

"Yeah, yeah," the darker voice muttered, coming the closest Leo had heard to its true tone. "I figured."

"You want to tell me why it's so urgent that you get back into shape?"

Raph glanced to him for a beat of silence. Then a smile touched his mouth and he raised his arm, indicating the elbow pad sagging at the crook of his arm. "Cuz this is jes sad, ain't it?" Leo scowled at the lie and knew full well that his brother pretended not to notice. "'Sides, I been missin' my sai."

Leo's heart stuttered as his brother turned to face him. "Where are they, anyway? They ain't here." He swept his arm around the room. "Ya got'em back, din'cha?"

"We got them," Leonardo said with a slow nod. "The night you disappeared."

Raph lifted his brow.

"Donnie's been keeping them safe for you, Raph."

"Donnie?"

Leo lifted his hands, helplessly. "If you want your weapons, you're going to have to talk to him."

Golden eyes widened.

By My Brother's Hand

Disclaimer : Come on, by now you know there's no owning here!

A/N: It finally came together enough to warrant a posting! That, or it's really late and I'm making a judgement call. Either way, at least there's foreward motion again, heh? *Nudge nudge* Seriously, it is late here for me...

In case you haven't said, "Poor Raphie," today. Here you go! Attack of the mini-flashbacks!

By My Brother's Hand

Raphael paced, trying to ignore the dry ache at the back of his throat and the anxiety which had set the joint of his thumb between his teeth. His eyes flicked over his room in restless cycles, always ending at the rear-side of his door. Leonardo had gone through it not five minutes ago with a soft promise that he'd be right back.

With Donatello in tow.

He swore and took another loop around the bedroom.

Talk to Donnie. Talk to Donnie, get your sai. Easy, right? Nothing to it. Happens all the time, doesn't it? Sit down, face-to-face, hash things out, and hugs all around.

A nauseous grunt snuck up his throat and he set a hand on the top of his dresser. He frowned into the mouth of a half-eaten bag of chips he couldn't remember opening as his stubbed fingernails ran over the lower plates of his plastron. Like the motion could massage some peace of mind back into his gut.

Having a little trouble, Raph?

His eyes rolled shut. Just what he needed. He pushed from the dresser, bypassing the desk and closet and rounding past the mattress. His gaze was downcast but he could still see the phantom of his older brother turning a slow circle as he watched the warrior's strides. Raphael couldn't understand. Both "Mikey" and "Donnie's" voice had fallen silent like Michelangelo said they would. But "Leo"...why wouldn't he go away?

After all we've been through? the shadow sneered. **You're likely to hurt my feelings, little brother.**

Raph ignored him, coming to a stop before the doorknob. His eyes strayed up the patterns in the wood and followed the thin, simple frame that hemmed the door from cement. No steel, no smooth surface that could only be opened from the other side. Absolutely no reason to fear the thought of it swinging inward.

Nothing but him .

He let out a growl and hooked his fingers behind his neck. The cool fabric of his mask tails was caught between his spine and interlaced knuckles and he stood for a moment with his head bowed, just listening to the amplified passing of his breath.

You could always leave him to me.

Raphael's eyes snapped open and sent a scathing glare towards the other.

"Leo's" shoulders lifted, feigning innocence. **Only a suggestion.**

His teeth shone in a white crescent against the shifting darkness of his face. Raph rolled his eyes again and crossed over to the makeshift bed. He wiped at the corners of his mouth, studying the faded blue sheets while "Leo" studied him. The rumpled surface stared back at him as well, closing his throat as a stifling familiarity fell about his shoulders. His gaze broke away, rising to the loose cords of the hammock.

Raph?

With a snarl, he bent down and curled his fingers into the mattress. He yanked it from the wall, stumbling a bit as his wasted strength fought to manage the bed's weight. He tossed it aside and paid no heed to the crash of one of the corners dragging his desk lamp to the floor. Raph swiped a thumb beneath his nostrils before entangling his fingers into the soft netting. His brow set in concentration.

He hoisted himself up, spinning with the deft grace only obtained through countless nights of the same routine. The one difference from all those nights before was the pained wince that crossed his face as his cramped calves pulled.

He flopped into the netting. His hands gripped the edges just long enough to adjust to the swaying and then he eased himself back into the embrace of the ropes. The harsh lines of his face softened and he beamed at the network of cracks spreading over the ceiling. He stretched out his legs and, after noticing that he couldn't still them, tucked his hands behind his head.

You *can* face him, can't you?

Raph sighed. "There ain't nuthin' ta face. It's Donnie."

The base of his neck tingled at the specter's low hiss. **Yes, it's Donnie. But which Donnie will it be, I wonder? The one who loves his dear brother? Or the traitor who sold us out?** His voice darkened with venom. **One look at his eyes, Raphie, do you think you will know?**

"Ya don' know what yer talkin' 'bout," Raph muttered, scowling at the ceiling.

Don't I? The turtle flinched as the shadow appeared at his other shoulder. **Need I remind you what I know?**

"I don' -" Raph's voice faltered as he found he could not break his gaze from a crack near the light. His ears began to buzz with static and his walls broke into the darkness surrounding their home. His safe haven was crumbling. The smells, his things, all the earthly goods that stamped that place as "Raphael's" was being peeled away again.

"Leo, ya can' - !"

Flash.

Jets of rainbows moved overhead, twirling back and forth and back again. Rhythmic and oddly haunting like a symphony. A tune meant only for him. Crusted blood fractured as his mouth turned into an idiotic grin, bringing a fresh supply to the surface.

He was stretched out on that damn table with that same damn white noise blotting out any sense of reality or rational thought. Just another night now, wasn't it? The cracks in his lower lip dug deeper as a weak and bitter chuckle slipped by.

"Is something amusing you, Raphael?"

His eyes rolled in an attempt to find the voice hovering just beyond his shoulder. The buckles on the collar clinked as he twisted, but all he caught was a blurred shape standing just on the edge of his vision. "Nah, not a thing, bro..."

The creature he supposed was Donatello let out a scoff and faded away. He was instantly replaced by a shadow looming over him, blotting out the shifting lights as she did so.

"Still feeling difficult today, Raphael?"

His bland smile was gone. "No, Mistress..."

Karai hummed, taking the time to carefully look him over. "You know, I find no joy in seeing you like this, Raphael." Her hand cupped his

face, allowing her thumb to stroke his temple in a motion that was both soothing and mocking. He failed to stifle the shiver which wound up his neck. "What a pity you've become. But not to worry. You're all but done with your time here. But before we part ways, I do have one more thing I must ask of you."

He raised his chin, trying to see her.

"If I am to return you to Leonardo and the others...you must tell me where they are."

Her words sank through him, cutting like crystal shards.

"They...the l-lair, M-Mistress," he whispered after a moment.

"Yes, the lair. I wish to know where it is."

She couldn't be asking this of him.

Not this. Surely, not this.

His throat worked against the nausea bubbling within his chest. Dark wrists gave a futile tug at their bindings. "B-b-but...the lair...is - is a secret." He shook his head, minutely. "I...I can't..."

"Oh, Raphael." She leaned further over him, completely eclipsing his overhead companions and bringing her face into startling focus. "For once, don't fight. By helping me, you'd only be helping yourself."

His head wobbled, weakly, between her hands as if to reject her words. She wasn't deterred.

"All I wish is to bring you home."

He stared up into her emerald eyes, barely aware that heat had broken from behind his own. Her thumb smeared the tear into nothing, however, before it could travel far. Her lips parted in a forgery of compassion and her voice was low as she drew ever closer to him.

"Even now, you are thinking of the location, Raphael. You're freedom is so near."

Thinking it? He was mapping out an entire damn route just behind his sinuses. She was right. Everything she wanted to know, all of his knowledge, whatever she could ask teetered on that fine line between hidden thought and treacherous speech.

His head spun, fear swelling up inside him that in his delirious state, that line could so readily be crossed.

And he wasn't a hundred percent sure he wasn't willing to give it to her. If only just to be done.

Maybe he'd already fallen. Nothing left to salvage.

"Say it, Raphael," she said in more of a command than request.

Say it.

Let 'em deal with her for a while.

Let 'em take the fall for not coming.

Screw 'em.

Screw her.

Say it, Raphael. Help yourself.

Be selfish.

Who the hell was talking?

"Raphael," her voice was curt in warning.

" No *."*

The word was bitten out through a grimace, grinding past a clenched jaw. A breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding let loose behind it and slumped into the table, panting. A tired smile etched the corner of his mouth, as if uttering that single syllable had taken whatever reserves he'd had left.

"No. Is...secret..."

Karai gazed down at him. Her fingernail tapped beside his head, striking the tabletop with piercing clicks.

"You disappoint me, Raphael." She shook her head, slowly, before turning away. "Enjoy your session, then."

He had no chance at a rebuttal before the door closed and the smeary figure of his so-called brother reappeared beside him.

"Always with the hard road, eh, Raphael?"

His heart sank.

He caught the slight movement of his brother nudging a set of black-rimmed glasses higher. He swallowed, thickly, listening to the shuffling movements being made near him though he couldn't see.

"She-she nev'a a-asked ya...?"

"Of course she did," the lighter voice answered casually. "And I told her."

Raphael's chin jerked towards him in surprise only to hiss as the collar scraped across his neck. "Y-ya wha' -? Why?"

"Because she doesn't want to destroy it."

His eyes widened. "Ya don't r-really b...believe -"

"I do," the other said. "All she wants is to hear it, Raphael. In your *voice."*

He stiffened as the cold point of a needle suddenly grazed his arm.

"So let's see if we can't loosen that tongue of yours back up," Donatello growled into his ear.

Flash.

Poison seared his veins, spreading a fiery pulse to his very toes. That pain, though, took a quick backseat as the ceiling tiles began to melt. They condensed and congealed above him, running together into a thick, visceral material that soon couldn't defy gravity. Heavy, acidic drops scorched his skin, raising shiny blisters wherever they struck. Blisters which swelled and burst, seeping amber liquid onto the table.

Slow steps circled him, apparently impervious to the hellish rain. He could feel the amusement surveying his agony. Funny, he never took Don as the kind of guy who'd enjoy watching ants burn. He could just imagine the quiet smirk on his brother's face, his chin caught between a thumb and forefinger like it always was whenever he was fascinated by something.

What can't be taken from you?

The lesions had been gone by morning. If they'd ever been there at all.

Flash.

Alarms blasted, snapping coherent thought before it had a chance to form. His head thrummed with the steady flashing of blue, red, purple, and orange. Darkness closed around him again and he shook himself, violently, to knock the pain aside. It didn't help and he was left to wait for what was coming.

He didn't want to see it again. He didn't want to stare into that empty face at the end of the little picture show. Sometimes, they left the screens on that single image, never finishing his night with the

promise of death. They let him sit for hours with that larger-than-life face glaring down at him. All empty and shiny with silver disdain that cut right through him.

He didn't want to look at himself anymore.

"Like I said," Donnie voice purred, materializing at his shoulder and leering at the televisions. "Such a messy situation you've gotten into."

Flash.

He had settled into the corner of his cell, one knee drawn up to rest his elbow on. His fingers worked at his forehead, tapping at it with an almost frantic conviction.

"It ain't Donnie," he muttered, slurring the words as he shot a glance towards the opposite end of the room. "It ain't. I know Donnie. I know 'im. I know, I know, I know -"

That's right, Raphie-boy** , "Leo" sneered from his post beneath the camera. **Keep telling yourself that.

"I jes gotta keep 'em apart, tha's all." He knocked a knuckle against his temple. "Tha Donnie in 'ere an'," he drew his other leg up, glaring towards the door, "an' tha one ou' there."

Sure, whatever you say** , the shadow said with a curled lip. **S'long as you let me kill him when the time comes.

Raphael looked up, sharply. "Wha'?"

Flash.

Electricity lit the far wall with blue and white starbursts. His muscles were seized by lightning and left him paralyzed until it ran its course. His gaze was fixed on the far wall, where one shadow remained solid against the chaotic light show.

"Feeling any more inclined to speak with Karai yet?"

Arms folded across the chest. Heel braced casually against the wall. Grinning as those dead eyes watched their prisoner fry. He hated him then, just as surely as he hated her.

If life were fair *, Karai's words slithered to him from the dark.* It would be Donatello standing there in your stead.

It will be.

Flash.

"Raph, you all right?"

Flash.

Blood fell into perfect circles. All but black on the cement.

Flash.

"Raph, come on. You need to wake up."

Fearless? Leo?

Flash.

A thumb dug into his bicep, pressing in the tender and discolored flesh until his skull smacked off steel.

"Stay awake, big guy. I need you conscious for this next bit."

Flash.

Blue lines of light blinded him. Bit his flesh. The broken scream that echoed down the empty hallways was his own.

"Again. He's gotta give sometime."

Flash.

"-hear me, bro-"

Flash.

Just stop. Someone stop.

Flash.

"You will break within these walls, Raphael."

Of course, Mistress.

Whatever you want.

Flash.

Flash.

"Just talk, Raphael," Donnie whispered. "Let it end."

Donnie?

The one in here? The one out there?

Who's talking?

Doesn't matter. Kill 'em both.

Flash.

" -phael! I need you -"

Flash.

" - *tell me where they are* - "

Flash.

Flash.

Flash.

" - to wake up!"

Leonardo's voice, fueled by desperate fear, broke the other dreams around him.

Raphael awoke to a hand clutching at his shoulder and panic seized his heart. She'd come for him. He gave a blind kick, forgetting in an instant where he had chosen to rest. The hammock bucked, tilting wildly to the left as he flailed for balance. He overcompensated, went sling-shooting back to the right, and found nothing but air between himself and the cement.

His plastron hit with a deafening crack that sent his impact punching through him. He grunted, taking in the sting of his forearms and thighs meeting the floor. He drug his chin from right to left as he tried to fit himself back into the current surroundings. Wondering which world he had finally landed in.

There were two sets of green knees before his beak.

Well, that was different.

A hand settled on his carapace as one of the knees inched closer. "Raph, are you hurt?"

He went rigid.

That voice...

His voice was here.

"Raph..." Leo began, but his concern went no further so far as the other knew.

He ignored the leader, pushing himself to his hands. Every fiber of his being zeroed in on the creature to his left. He looked up, searching for the face that mocked worry and pissed upon loyalty and family and friendship and whatever other sentiment he thought siblings might share.

He found it.

Donatello, his *brother* , was kneeling right in front of him.

And there wasn't a shackle in sight.

Deep inside his head, "Leo's" eyes narrowed with wicked delight.

Re-Alliance Pt 2

Disclaimer: TMNT and all characters do not belong to me.

A/N: Don't you hate when you finally get the guts to tell your boss where they put their job...and then realize you have replace the damn thing? Everything gets complicated. Johnny Paycheck left that part out of his song. Anyhoo, life is back in order (hooray for new jobs!) and I can return to my stories!

So, for all you wonderful and patient folks who've been waiting...here is Raph and Donnie's showdown. Hope you like...

Re-Alliance Pt. 2

Leonardo reached the top of the steps and quickly turned to stride down the hall. But just as he started along the line of bedrooms, a hand slid over his shoulder, drawing him to a stop. He turned, finding Donatello had paused in front of Michelangelo's room. Apprehension filling his face, he dropped his eyes and readjusted the strap of the duffle bag slung over his shoulder.

Leo faced him, his hand half extending towards him. "Donnie, what -?"

"I, uh...just give me a minute, Leo."

The inventor drew back and looked out over the lair. He ran his knuckles, restlessly over the palm of his other hand before reaching forward to grip the iron handrail. Leo's eyes were drawn to the discolored flesh still ringing the lower half of his brother's throat as Donatello swallowed.

He set his hip against the rail as well. "You nervous?"

Donnie closed his eyes and lowered his chin with a sigh.

"Nothing is going to happen this time, Donnie. We got him back, he's good."

"It's not that. I'm not worried about getting hurt, I just..." He touched his tongue to his lower lip and his brow seemed to crumple with his shoulders. "I'm afraid for him, Leo."

The leader followed the other's gaze into the living room. He thought of the empty sheen that had appeared in Raphael's eyes while they had spoken earlier. His jaw flexed, uneasily.

"After all," Donnie continued when he didn't get a response. "The powder Leatherhead developed was only able to speed up sobriety. It might have cleared his system of whatever they were marinating it in, but...Leo, you know it wasn't a cure for what he's been through."

Leo shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Karai tortured him." The words were spoken softly to the dark room below, but Leo felt them cut through his chest. "She worked on him, conditioned him into that state you found him in. You don't get over that in a few hours or with a bowl of soup. He needs time and healing and..." Don broke off when his voice grew thick. He gave a sharp cough, his mouth twisting bitterly. "And I have no idea if my presence will cause him more harm than good."

"Donnie." Leo cupped his fingers over the top lip of his brother's shell and gave an affectionate tug. Donatello looked back to him and Leo gave a smile that he wasn't entirely sure was reaching his eyes. "It's going to be okay. Raph wants to talk to you."

"Because you gave him an ultimatum," he replied, hooking the strap on his shoulder higher. The bag shifted against his hip and a metallic clinking came from its depths. Both turtles shot a look to it. Among the smaller, less threatening items Donnie had gathered should the opportunity to finish the exam of his brother's injuries, Raphael's sai had finally been removed from the shrine-like position they'd held on

Donatello's desk for the past three months in order to be returned to their owner.

Leo let out a sigh. "Regardless, he agreed to see you." Donnie gave a weak chuckle and shook his head. "He's still your brother, Don, and you're still his. He'll learn to trust you again."

Donnie searched the leader's dark eyes, a faint spark of hope daring to cross his face. Then, he looked away and pushed himself upright. "Whatever you say, Leo," he said with the ghost of his credulous grin. It was a weary smile, but all the same, after so long going without it, Leo took its appearance as a victory. "Let's just be ready, though, right?"

"Of course," Leo said, giving his brother a good-natured shove before returning to his trek down the hall. He smiled when he felt Donnie fall into step right behind him. Reaching the door, he rapped his knuckles off the pale and chipped wood. "Hey, Raph, I'm back."

He didn't get an answer.

They exchanged a look and Leonardo knocked louder. "Raph? It's Leo, I'm coming in!"

He swept inside the bedroom with Donnie on his heels and both came to a halt at the sight of the mattress's upheaval. It rested, haphazardly, on the opposite side of the room. One corner was propped up by the edge of the desk. Leo's eyes cut aside and relief filled his chest when he found his brother had made it into his hammock and was now snoozing in the swaying ropes.

He let out his breath and turned to Donatello. The inventor wasn't sharing the feeling, though. A line of concern had appeared between his eyes as he watched the larger warrior sleep. Leo looked back.

Raphael was sprawled with one hand tucked behind his head while the other had fallen across his plastron. His fingers moved over his chest in restless twitches. His teeth were exposed in a grimace and

his breath was labored, like he were working his way through a fever dream.

Leo strode forward. "Raph, you all right?"

Raphael flinched against his voice.

Alarm flared down the leader's arms and he closed the distance between them. "Raphie, come on. You need to wake up."

If possible, Raphael's calm demeanor, lacking any moaning or thrashing against the horrors occurring behind his eyes, was disconcerting in itself. Leo sidled up to the hammock, searching the other's face for any hint of respite. "Hey, can you hear me, bro?"

Donatello's soft footsteps drew closer. "Leo. I don't think that's a nightmare."

Leo set his hand over the wide, emerald shoulder and the muscle beneath his palm tightened. "Raph, I need you to listen. Whatever you're seeing right now, it's not real. You're not there anymore. So you have to wake up now, all right?"

His chin jerked upward with a soft inhale and Leo leaned closer.

"Come on, Raphael," he said, keeping his voice low to hold it level. He gave the other a slight shake. "You have to wake up!"

The golden eyes flew open.

His pupils shrank against the light.

Leonardo jumped back as his brother kicked at the air, blindly. Without his hands to stabilize the hammock, however, it writhed out from beneath the larger turtle. And despite a valiant effort to regain control, Raphael ended up face down on the floor.

Donnie and Leo dropped beside him, fully expecting the onslaught of a furious bellow from their sibling. It never came. Instead, Raphael

only panted into the cement. His eyes moved back and forth in ceaseless strokes. Leo sat tense above him, waiting for the dream to give way to reality.

Donatello, having spent his life as the family's makeshift caretaker, however, reacted differently. He shuffled closer to the faller warrior, saying, "Raph, are you hurt?" and heedlessly set his hand upon his brother's carapace.

The needle of Leo's internal danger-meter shot into the red. "Donnie -"

He never got a chance to finish his warning. Raphael's ragged breathing was drawn into silence and he went rigid at Donnie's soft words. His arms and legs slid underneath, gathering his strength for a beat before he began to push himself upright. He lifted his head just as Don, as if realizing what he'd done, snapped his hand back.

For the briefest moment, Leo swore the world shuttered to a stop.

And then a darkness was flooding Raphael's sharp eyes. His teeth appeared in an unnatural grin.

Leo threw himself between his brothers even as Raph lunged forward.

Their plastrons cracked together just as fiercely as lightning striking. Catching the power of his taller sibling's spring, Leo felt his shell slam into Donnie's chest as they bowled over the inventor. The older pair went down, each scrabbling for an advantage over the other. In his weakened state, Raphael could not break the desperate grip which clinging to him and weighing him down. Leonardo, fearing that his own strength might cause even more damage to the withered turtle, didn't dare to do more than incapacitate him.

Drawing them into a savage stalemate.

That's when the familiar furious roar appeared.

Donatello, meanwhile, had managed to haul himself out of the whirl of flying limbs and dust. Staggering to his feet, he gaped at the fierce struggle, so reminiscent of the scraps from their childhood. Back before their master had intervened their brawls with cool reasoning and control.

Raphael twisted and arched as he could to throw Leo off. Leonardo, for his part, fought tooth and nail to keep the other from rising.

This was Karai's victory.

Brown eyes widened.

"Donnie!" Leo cried, "Get Splinter!"

He didn't move.

Brother against brother. One pitted against the rest. Their family had been fractured from within. Somehow, she had used them, had used *him* , to dissolve Raphael into this primal creature of vengeance. And now she had unleashed his ill-gained wrath up them all.

He swore beneath his breath.

She was *still* winning.

Calloused hands curled into fists.

Raphael had managed to get to his knees and he twisted back to glare at the leader. Leo looked up at him and saw no recognition in his brother's face in that split second before an elbow was driven into his cheek bone. His neck snapped aside, slamming his head into the rim of Raph's shell. His vision wavering in the assault, he tightened his grip around the other's waist.

"Donnie!" he shouted again.

Donatello started from his reverie, but instead of making for the door, he threw himself towards the duffle bag that had been knocked aside

in the scuffle. He tore the zipper aside and rifled through its contents. The frustrated growls and smacks of flesh against flesh rose behind him as he muttered to himself, fervently.

He had a guess, a bare hope, really, that his brother needed something to negate what Karai had done to him. He needed something, a symbol, of who he really was. Not her prisoner. Not anymore.

With a snarl, Raphael flipped himself to his shell. His heel found the leader's shoulder, finally breaking his grip and sending him sliding backwards on his tail. Continuing the roll, Raph grunted as he came to unsteady feet and charged for the inventor's exposed backside.

Don spun on his toes, leaping to meet the enraged onslaught. Silver flashed from his hips to his chest and Raphael slid to a stop. Mere feet and a crossed pair of sais separated the panting brothers.

Raphael's forehead crumpled into a scowl. He dropped his eyes to the gleaming points of the middle tines which created an "X" before him. He breathed out, glittering eyes seeming to become entranced by his beloved weapons.

Leo tensed as he rolled to a knee. "Don -"

"It's okay, Leo," Donnie whispered, refusing to take his eyes off the other. "It's okay."

The leader flicked his eyes between them, warily, but sank his weight down to rest on his heels. His ear caught frantic steps approaching and Mikey rounded the corner, slamming his shoulder off the door's frame. He hit the brakes, though, when Leo lifted a warning hand and then drew a finger to his lips. Mikey's blue eyes were wide with doubt, but for once he held his tongue and withdrew.

"It's okay," Don said again. His pale knuckles returned to their natural shade as he relaxed his hold on the blades. Raphael continued to gaze at the weapons as if nothing else existed in the room around

him. Slowly, Donatello flipped the sai and extended them so the red-banded hilts were facing their owner.

Dark and scarred hands rose, fingers easing over the soft material which encased the pommels. Donnie relented his hold and fell back a silent step. Raph stood motionless for a long moment before he mimicked Don's move and spun the blades over his palms. Familiar steel slipped readily between his thick fingers and he curled his hands into fists about the weapons. His shoulders sagged a little as something like relief crossed his features.

Donnie smiled and dared to sneak a look to the others.

He missed when Raph's eyes sprang open, fire igniting behind his irises.

His heel connected with Don's abdomen, throwing him backwards. The dresser jumped into the wall as the inventor slammed into it. He slid down, hard. Brown eyes shot upward along with his hands, catching the fist that came swinging in towards his head.

Raph's wrist stopped short as Mikey and Leo's voices rose behind them in alarm.

The larger warrior straddled Don's thighs, his padded knees wedged in tight to the other's waist to pin him into place. The silver point of his sai's middle tine nipped at the olive green neck. Their strengths shuddered against one another as a sluggish red line snuck from beneath it. Donatello looked into the other's face and his heart sank when he found the golden eyes had been consumed by murder.

Raphael was lost in chaos.

Still caught within some ever-shifting rift between reality and his hellish memories, he struggled to sort the world out. He knew that his treacherous brother had someone gained the opportunity to hover over while he was sleeping. Donnie had gotten some dumb

schmuck to try and hold him down before they began whatever sick new game Karai had concocted.

A wild smirk pulled at his mouth. Idiots. All of 'em. They thought they could come into his own cell without Karai or a horde of Foot without expecting something bad happening to them. Then were stupid enough to hand him weapons? Well, they had what was coming to them, didn't they?

And now he had *him* pinned beneath him.

Yes , "Leo's" dark voice cackled like static behind his thoughts. Raph felt the shadow slide in beside him, his malice cutting through the turtle in a shiver.

Yes, yes, yes , he all but slathered into Raph's ear. He sank to his haunches with those wicked eyes fixed upon the short ribbon of blood upon Donatello's neck. **This is what we've been waiting for, Raphie-boy. Do it. He deserves it, doesn't he?**

But as Raphael glared down at the other turtle, he found his chest was tight. His mouth dry and burning. One sai was pinned flat between his palm and Donnie's plastron. The other shook minutely as war broke out in his mind. That frigid hole inside of him was begging to follow the through. To push that blade a bit further and unleash that wet gurgle which would herald the traitor's death.

And yet...the other side howled against the atrocity which they teetered upon. Raph blinked against the sudden urge to preserve his brother's life. He had thought that part of his soul had been crushed out weeks ago. What was it doing here? Why'd it have to come back to life *now* ?

His eyes narrowed as he tried to remember which side was right.

You're kidding , "Leo" hissed. **We haven't survived all this time just to pass up our chance! We got 'im, Raph! Gut him!**

The blade shook harder. If he didn't choose soon, it was going to make the choice for him. And he'd miss both opportunities, whether it be mercy or vengeance. He just wished he knew which was right.

He started as a firm hand settled over his trembling forearm, sending a jolt through his hollow stomach. His ears sharpened towards the soft voice that was suddenly beside him, sitting opposite of his shadowy companion. Quiet words finally permeated through his dream induced rage.

"Raphael," Leonardo simply said. "Don't."

His attention was drawn to the left and when he met dark eyes, he found they were brimmed to their limit with fearful tears. The sight twisted something, painfully, deep inside of him.

"F-fearless?"

"Let him go, Raphael."

Don't you dare! the specter snarled.

Raph's eyes slid towards "Leo", automatically, and Leonardo scowled, tightening his grip to regain the other's focus. "Don't listen to him, bud." The larger turtle hesitated, glancing back to him. "I know he's still in there, Raphael. I know he's still trying to poison your mind...but you can't let him do this. Donnie's your brother. No matter what Leo or Karai tries to make you think. No matter what they made you believe, you gotta know Donnie would never, ever hurt you."

What does he know? He wasn't there. He doesn't know what we've been through. What *he* put us through!

"Raph, please, listen to -"

"I can feel it."

Leonardo fell silent at the low and husky words.

"I can *still* feel it," he said again, lifting his chin to look the leader in the eye. "That...that *thing* he put in me. It's still in'ere, crawlin' around." He bared his teeth a little as a harshness snuck into his words. "Tha damn thing is eatin' me from tha inside, Leo! I ain't imaginin' tha'!"

Leonardo's eyes widened.

What the hell had Karai done to him?

"He did it," Raph continued, ignoring the soft gasp from the doorway and bewildered look that was shot to him from the inventor. "He *laughed* at me while he did it!"

That's right. We know the truth of it, don' we, Raph?

Donnie hissed as the pressure increased, widening the tear in his flesh. His fingers closed about the emerald wrist just below Leo's hand. Mikey edged closer, his hands ghosting over the chains of his own weapons.

Gold eyes broke from black, refocusing on the face pinned beneath him. "He laughed..."

Tension filled his arm. Leo's eyes widened. "Raph!"

"S-sorry."

Raph froze. Leo froze. Mikey too.

Donatello stared up into his brother's glassy gaze. His throat worked a shallow swallow past the deadly point.

"I-I'm sorry, Raph," he whispered. "I'm sorry for all of it."

"Donnie..." Mikey began, weakly.

Don's hand tightened around his brother's wrist when Raph made to draw back, uncertainly. They glared at one another, Raphael's face

falling into an unreadable mask while Donatello's chin trembled and heat swelled behind his eyes.

"I wasn't fast enough. I couldn't find you...but...but I tried, Raphie. I swear I tried everything I knew. It just...I couldn't..."

Raph stared at him as the first tears broke free and forged a slow path along the inventor's cheeks. He had expected tears. Tears of fear, tears of guilt, cowardice, desperation, or whatever his brother could drudge up to try and save himself. Tears he hardened himself against.

He hadn't expected to face grief.

As he scrutinized his brother's quiet weeping, he found his own vision smearing at the edges. The room blotted from out from around him, leaving him alone in silence with those heart-broken eyes below him.

They were so different from the eyes he'd known over the past months. Not cruel or gleaming with sadistic amusement. They were pale and softened with a compassion that Raphael had never fully understood before his capture. These were eyes he had known to crinkle with delight whenever his newest contraption ran its test run without a hitch. Eyes that welled with worry if a stitch happened to pull too tight. Eyes he had seen ignite with untapped wrath whenever he slid between a fallen brother and an enemy. Eternally patient and tinted by the nature that allowed him to empathize with Leo's stress, or fall into play against Mikey's wit, or listen for hours on end to whatever tirade that had brought Raph to his lab or garage when he needed to vent.

These were the eyes that, unlike "Mikey's" and "Leo's" had vanished in the duration of his imprisonment.

His brother. The Donnie-in-Here.

Donatello.

"Leo" gave a warning snarl. **Raph...**

The bloodied sai clattered to the cement and drowned out the specter's voice.

Three brothers watched in breathless wonder as the fourth suddenly slumped. His weight came down upon his knees, leaving him straddling his brother's legs. He seemed to crumple inward, shaking all over as he stared at the other.

The madness slipped out of his face and Raphael looked at his brother with a broken kind of hope. Almost child-like upon his blasted and tormented features. The breath he took was ragged and shook his shoulders before he finally whispered, hoarsely.

"Donnie?"

The inventor shifted, pulling himself free enough to push himself to his knees. Hesitantly, his hands extended to rest over the larger turtle's shoulders. "Yeah, Raph," he replied just as huskily, "I'm here."

Haunted eyes rose to study his face one more time. "It wasn' ya, was it?"

"Never."

A tremor rocked the warrior and he looked to the blood smearing the other's neck. "An' I...I almost -" His teeth tried to clench back a sob that still managed to escape from him as low croak.

Donatello moved quickly, his calloused hands going from Raph's shoulders to his scarred carapace. He brought Raphael into a fierce and defensive hug, as if by sheer will he might be able to stave off the horror of what had almost happened to their family.

"Don't think on it, Raphie," he said in his quiet, undeniable voice.

"B-but...aft'a all I did...downstairs, in tha lab...aw, hell, Donnie..." Raph's fists tightened at his sides and he dropped his chin further

into the curve of Don's shoulder. "Ya almos' jus'..."

Donatello shushed him softly, saying, "I got your back now, hothead. Don't think on it."

He glanced towards Leo, who had finally pushed back and risen to his feet, beaming at his reunited siblings. Don flashed him a weak smile of his own and dropped his head against Raphael's in relief, refusing to break the embrace.

Leo staggered a step forward as a weight struck him from behind. He twisted to look into Mikey's bright blues. The youngest wrinkled the bridge of his beak and threw his arm up and around the leader's neck. Leo let out a huff and returned the gesture with a good-natured thump upon his brother's shell. Together, they watched the other two continue to weep and sniffle apologies to each other.

"So," Mikey said quietly after a moment, "What do we do now, Leo?"

Dark eyes narrowed behind his blue mask. He broke away from his brother and circled around the kneeling turtles. Don and Raph looked up to him even as he eased himself to his own knee. He clapped his hands onto the shoulders of his middle siblings.

"Now, Mikey," he said. "We stay."

A slow grin materialized over the youngest face and with a wild whoop, he leaped and landed in the center of all three of them. Donnie and Leo immediately lifted their voices against the action and scolded him as he laughed and twisted to take his place opposite of Leo, completing their little circle.

Raphael said nothing against him, but he did lean to the side to knock his elbow, affectionately, off of Mikey's.

Unnoticed by all, "Leo" watched the display with his phantom lip curled back with disdain. His vibrant, pupil-less eyes narrowed to thin slits.

Retreating a step, he turned and faded into the shadows.

---

* Eeee, a little too much cheese? I hope not...oh, well, I'm a sap, I'll admit it!

** One more chapter...we can't just let Karai be now, can we? And of course, "Leo" hasn't had his final say on the matter. Your thoughts, please?

Epilogue: Finished Business

Disclaimer: All TMNT characters do not belong to me in any way, shape, or form.

Epilogue: Finished Business

4 Months Later...

Darkness crept over the city, claiming it for another night. Gates were drawn down before the doors of small street vendors. Gray-scaled video feeds glowed inside cramped security offices, watching over the foyers and front counters of businesses. The black silhouette of New York's skyline was scattered with the fluorescent green of late night janitors working their way from floor to floor among the offices.

At Saki Enterprises, however, the entire nineteenth floor was still ablaze. The only movement took place in Karai's private conference room where she and the ever diligent Mr. Burns were still on the clock, finishing a meeting with an associate on the west coast.

The screen at the head of the table went blank as the investor signed off from his end. Karai and her assistant rose in unison, jotting down last minute notes and gathering their paperwork silently.

Like any desirable employee, Mr. Burns had taken his run-in with Leonardo in stride. The following morning, he had arrived to work freshly pressed and bearing her favorite blend of coffee. Aside from the slight shadow under his eyes, suggesting he hadn't gotten much sleep, the subject of the stranger who had slammed his head off his own desk never came up.

Karai valued that about him.

He lifted his larger pile of binders and notepads from the table. "I'll have the governor's anniversary card on your desk to sign in the

morning, ma'am."

The woman gave him a curt nod. "You've included lilies in the bouquet?"

"His wife's favorite. Yes, ma'am."

"Good. You know Senator Hill will be visiting the city on Friday?"

"I'll reserve your table at the Plaza."

Karai snapped her binder shut and gave him a small smile. "Very good, Mr. Burns."

He dipped his chin, respectfully, and reached for the door. "Would you prefer a brunch appointment or an afternoon lunch -?"

The lights flickered around them and then died.

Karai froze.

Burns looked up, bewildered, as the building's power wound down with a low hum. The conference room, the outer hall, everything had winked out. Even the emergency lights powered by the generators had failed to ignite.

Karai frowned, lowered her papers to the table, and turned to survey the dark room. She went to the window, looking out into the city. Her face hardened to see the lights of the neighboring buildings all still shining bright. Apparently, the blackout had only consumed her tower.

"Donatello," she hissed beneath her breath.

Her assistant abandoned the half opened door, instead stepping towards the table again. "Ma'am -mmmph!"

Karai spun as his papers and binders bounced off the polished wood and the door cracked shut. Crossing by the long table, she twisted

the knob and opened the door just enough to peer out in the hall. By the dim light filtering through the high windows at the end of the corridor, she found it empty in both directions.

She drew back, closing herself in once more before she returned to her seat. Her hand searched the underside of the table until it came across a small leather sheath that had been fastened within her reach. She withdrew a short blade, it's steel flashing in the slight light.

Her skin tingled, triggering the awareness that always lingered near the back of her mind. She turned her head in silence, poised for the assault she had been anticipating for the past few months.

Leonardo, it seemed, had had enough.

The large screen opposite of her suddenly lit up and she blinked against the white of it. Broken images flashed by too fast for her to register before the screen was consumed with a haze of snow. Slowly, color and shape seeped back into formation, allowing a video to roll smoothly before her.

It was a promotional piece Saki Enterprises had produced. One for the human resources department to force upon new employees. A young blond woman stood to the right, allowing a clear shot of the tower to be seen in the background while she spoke.

" - prises, we seek to deliver client satisfaction and delve further into community service than any of our competitors."

Karai's brow lifted as a thick red line cut diagonally in the left corner of the screen. It dragged itself across the picture, scrawling a single, cursive word over the smiling woman's face.

LIAR.

The screen went black for a beat and then was filled by bold white letters.

SEE, KARAI?

WE KNOW HOW TO PLAY, TOO.

WANNA SEE?

" - on a tour of the newly constructed Saki Building, name after our late, great founder, Oroku Saki -"

TYRANT.

VILLAIN.

PSYCHO.

MURDERER.

" - and discover the meaning of one man's legacy -"

DEATH.

TORMENT.

CRUELTY.

HATRED.

WHAT IS YOUR LEGACY?

KARAI.

Karai blinked at a sudden spluttering above her head. The sprinkler heads clicked downward, unleashing an icy torrent of water upon her. Rivulets ran along her cheeks and her suit was doused to her skin.

Finally, emergency lights kicked on, interrupting the darkness with sharp white bursts. They throbbed against her eyes, freezing droplets in the air before she was plunged back into the night. Karai

closed her eyes, swallowing down her annoyance. Despite the blinding light and ear-piercing chirps of the fire alarm, she was certain there was no plea for help reaching out to the dispatch offices.

Donatello.

Even in her mind, the name was poisoned with her fury.

Opening her eyes, she scoffed at the pathetic movie still playing before her.

What is this, Leonardo? A taste of my own medicine?

Gripping the handle of her dagger, she kicked off her heels and the soaked carpet crept through the end of her pantyhose, slipping freezing water between her toes. She slid out of the conference room, keeping close to the wall as she moved. Her eyes roamed back and forth along the hall, finally settling on the office across from her.

The door had been left slightly ajar and, in the pulsing lights, she could make out the black shine of dress shoes. Karai stepped forward and set her hand on the wood, pushing the opening wide enough to peer inside.

Mr. Burns lay sprawled on the floor, out cold but alive. His chest rose and fell evenly and his eyes were twitching against the onslaught of water. A hastily scrawled note had been draped over his belly. The ink had already begun to run, but Karai doubted the note was honestly intended for the young man to read.

Dude, seriously? Time for a new job.

Rolling her eyes, she looked to the window beyond the desk. It was closed and latched from the inside, meaning Michelangelo had not gone out that way. He still had to be on this floor with her.

And with *him.*

Karai turned to leave and the digital intercom beside the entrance flared to life. It flashed with the Saki Enterprises logo before picking right back up with the promo video.

" - ist area to welcome visitors and clients. The entire building is state of the art, enabling maximum service. Be it in person, over the phone, or online -"

The CEO returned to the hall, her eyes measuring the distance to her own office and the store of weapons she kept there. She snuck into the open, her feet silent beneath the downpour around her. The jovial narrative followed her route, muffled by the locked offices that lined the way. Karai had managed to clear several feet before a tingle of warning danced across the back of her neck.

She looked over her shoulder.

Framed in darkness against the end window, she could see a shadowed figure and the dark katana hilts which rose above his shoulders. In the following bursts of light, she found his bared teeth, the clenched fists, and the wrath that burned in his black eyes.

They stood in timeless silence, statuesque but for a tiny quiver of cold that claimed Karai's lip once.

Then, she bared her own teeth in defiance and broke into a run. Her feet splashed through the thick carpet, throwing water to her knees and higher as she bolted along the hall. She went with fluid grace, her movements executed with purpose and resolve so that he would find no weakness in this tactical retreat.

She had no need to look back to know he was following. She would probably never have seen him anyway. He could have easily caught her, and yet, no hands fell upon her shoulders to haul her back and there was no sound of a blade sliding free of its sheath. There was a

reason, she knew, that he was allowing her to reach her office, but what it was, she was not sure.

So she ran, preferring to face him in her own environment if nothing else.

She bypassed her assistant's desk, throwing a shoulder into the ornate wood that led into her personal space. Karai stumbled into the office, dripping and wild-eyed, pulling herself up short when she reached the interior and a blast of hot air met her.

There was not a drop of water here, the office having been spared from the sprinklers. It was dimly lit by the sconces on the wall as it always was when she was not using it. However, every pane in the floor-to-ceiling windows behind her desk had been shattered, allowing the summer heat inside.

Her desk had been cleared, piling all of her belonging in a heap off to the left side. In the place of her computer, desk calendar, and golden name plate, there were fourteen cameras carefully piled. Her eyes widened.

It had been a few weeks after she had released Raphael that the first turtle-surveillance camera had winked offline. The others had followed steadily, disappearing one by one and Karai had declined to have them replaced. She had thought the act had been some sort of childish retaliation of Michelangelo or Donatello on behalf of their ruined sibling.

Besides losing the cameras, her scouts had not seen sign nor hint that the turtles had returned to the surface world. So she had relished her victory, disregarded the loss of her surveillance, and waited for the day they would come knocking for revenge.

Certainly, though, she had never considered that they would *save* the equipment for this occasion.

Karai flinched when that bubbly, toothy blond reappeared in the screen at her side.

" - Saki used to say, 'Our actions dictate our legacy.' That is one of the mottos we strive to -"

The video woman vanished in a burst of sparks when Karai's blade buried itself into the intercom. She stormed into the office, turning to face the large collection of Japanese weaponry she had built.

Only to find more glass scattered over the floor and pale, empty pegs staring back at her. The case had been stripped clean. Her heart sank as a chill crept up her arms.

With a low growl slipping from her throat, she spun to retrieve her dagger out of the dead screen, and then hesitated. Slowly, she squared off with the wide doorway and the warrior who was merged with the shadows beyond it.

"Leonardo," Karai hissed into the quiet.

He entered the low light. His black eyes were hard as obsidian.

Karai lifted her chin and folded her arms, trying to ignore how cold her suit now clung to her and her hair pasted to her face.

"I fear you've developed an ugly habit," she said, delicately, as if she had been expecting all along. "Stalking my office at all hours of the night. Must I file a restraining order against you?"

"I warned you, Karai," he said in a tone that was both soft and lethal. "I warned you long ago what would happen if you crossed us again."

The threat was remembered well.

Even as she faced her enemy, Karai could recall the words that had passed between them after she had destroyed the mutants' vile lair. The phantom crack of a jade statue's head off marble floors still rang between her ears.

"So," she said, feeling ice consume her eyes, "you've finally come for my head, is that it?"

He stepped into the office with water gliding from his shoulders and plastron. Long gone was the young warrior she had fought so long ago on the rooftops when the city was besieged by a war of Foot Elite and Purple Dragons. He stood taller than he once had, filled with a grim resolve she had never known, even when he had threatened her life.

There was a ruthless light in his eyes that night, like it really was her head that was on the line.

Leonardo seemed to be out for blood.

And to her chagrin, she knew there was no one more capable of getting it if he wanted.

"So, I take it the reunion did not go as planned?" she asked, keeping her words low to hide the tremor within them.

The turtle's nostrils flared, betraying the storm that reigned beneath his calm facade. "You could say that."

"I wondered," she said, taking confidence in the fact that he had chosen to speak instead of executing her on the spot. "His coping methods were quite...unusual. I suspect you have some rather fascinating conversations, no?"

His face twitched. "You have no idea."

"Actually, I really do," she smiled.

The hardness reclaimed his features in an instant. Leonardo shifted his weight again, easing himself further into the office. "I'm sure you do," he said quietly. "After all, you did it to him."

"Of course I didn't!" Karai spat, making his brow rise in surprise. The woman shook her head, exasperated. "Raphael understood his

purpose for serving as my guest. How he chose to deal with the consequences of that role lies entirely on him, not I, Leonardo."

His attempt at indifference dissolved. Leonardo closed the distance between them, his fists trembling with rage before he could stop it. But he swallowed down whatever hate-filled bile that had sprung into his mind and merely stood glaring at her while he fought for his composure. When he did speak, it was with a tight jaw, as if he were biting back far more thoughts than he allowed to spill.

"You dare...after everything you...my *brother* , Karai..." He drew a breath that shivered through him. "Even with your twisted heritage, what you did to him is unforgivable."

She lifted a finger, deflecting his wrath. "Yet he lives, does he not?"

His eyes narrowed with disgust.

"Yes, he lives," Karai said smoothly, advancing a few steps herself so they were honestly face-to-face. "No matter his condition, he was returned to you *alive* . Do not forget, Leonardo, that it was *you* who made the choice. You burdened your family with what remained of your warrior." Her mouth twisted with bitterness. "What choice did you offer me before you and your wretched allies flung my father from this world and life itself?"

His teeth flashed as he began to respond, but for a second time his argument died before it left his tongue. Leonardo seemed to deflate and his eyes slid right, to the door at his side. It had swung open when Karai entered the room and had fit itself neatly into the corner. His shoulders jerked with a mirthless scoff and he looked back to her with a thin grin.

"You know what?" he asked, wearily. "I'm over this, Karai. I'm not having this fight with you again. You wanted to teach me a lesson for taking out Shredder? Fine, I got it loud and clear." He sighed. "You'll never stop being his daughter."

She glared at him, steadfast. "No more than you could cease to follow the rat's teaching, I'll warrant."

"There's the problem, though," he said, black eyes boring into green. "I haven't always stayed true to my teacher's course, have I?"

A thread of concern wound through her stomach.

He drew himself back up, steel rising behind his resolve. "And these past months have been more terrible than anything you're father ever threw at us. You felt the need to break my family? To break my honor? Congratulations, it was broken. I could gut you right now for what you've done to my father and my brothers. It's certainly crossed my mind more than once, you know."

She tipped her head, coy and challenging. "Then why are you still speaking? You want your vengeance, Hamato? Why haven't you taken it?"

"Because," he replied, falling back a step. He reached out to take the golden handle of the office door. His face wore more grim determination than one retreating from battle deserved to bear. "It's not my right anymore."

The door followed his grasp, easily, drawing out from its corner with little more than a creak.

Revealing Raphael's tall frame nestled in the gap behind it.

Savage gold eyes seared through her, glaring past the bright red mask that adorned his face.

Karai's heart stuttered in her chest. "Leonardo..." she breathed.

He looked to her, merciless, before stepping back out into the falling water. "See you around, Karai."

" *Leonardo* !"

The door clicked shut behind him.

Karai returned her focus to the warrior before her. His arms were folded over his chest and one heel was lifted to brace against the dark wall. His recovery was evident in the smooth curve of his shoulders and biceps, though he had a long way to go before he reclaimed his former bulk. Shadows ringed what she could see of his eyes through his mask, confessing his lack of sleep.

But there as a flicker within his irises that she had not seen in the weeks leading up to his release. Like the weak sparking of a dying lighter, there was something still fighting to catch fire inside of him but hadn't quite managed to do so yet.

"Raphael," Karai said, breaking the silence in attempt to regain some semblance of authority in the situation. "It appears Leonardo has found something salvageable in you after all. I honestly believed his hope was in vain."

A tight smile curled over his mouth and he pushed himself from the wall. "Ya did yer best, girlie."

His voice was low and not nearly so disdainful as it had once been when he spoke with her.

"Almost had me goin' there fer a sec," he continued. "But I had a lot'a time ta think about things. About my... *stay* with ya..." His smoldering eyes lifted but were unable to rise further than her chin.

Karai grinned to herself, taking the moment to study him. His shoulders were hunched a bit, as if instinct were trying to draw him back into himself. At least, as far a giant, mutated turtle could manage. He shifted his weight, ever so slightly, from heel to heel and she could not miss the restlessness in his hands, clenching and unclenching.

Leonardo had obviously over-estimated their progress.

She still had sway over him yet.

" *Girlie* ," she replied, coldly. The thin confidence in his face wavered and he looked to her, warily. "My, my, Raphael, are you so quick to forget yourself when in my presence."

He dropped his chin, closing his eyes with a furrowed brow and a quick shake of his head.

"And look," she said, lightly. "Leonardo has gone and left you in my charge yet again I did warn you of this, didn't I? I warned you that they would not accept a broken soul in Raphael's stead."

"No," he snapped, glaring up at her. "Ya ain't doin' this, Karai. I ain't fallin' fer yer crap again." He drew himself up a bit. "I jes came here ta tell ya that ya failed. Ya ain't enough ta break us, jes like yer old man."

"Really?" Karai allowed herself and contemptuous laugh. "From where I stand, it seems you broke quite well, Raphael. Tell me, are you still talking to ghosts in your spare time?"

His eye twitched.

The woman rolled her eyes. "So this is your grand return to the war, is it? This pathetic attempt at an assault? A bit of flashing light and some property damage? I must admit, when I imagined the moment your hideous family coming for me, well...I just expected more."

A muscle tightly along his neck when he swallowed.

"So, please, Raphael, spare me this boredom," she pressed on, spurred by his prolonged silence. "You know well that this meeting won't end in my demise. So what have you come for?"

This time, when his eyes came upward, they managed to reach her own. Karai felt her smile falter and that small victory seemed to click

something deep within those golden irises. Raphael huffed out a bitter laugh.

"Restitution."

Karai did not move while she studied his face, considering her odds against him. With a few good meals, a clear head, and the embers of vengeance stirred, it honestly didn't bode well for her.

She broke for the door and the intercom beside it where the hilt of her dagger still jutted from the device. Raphael sprang from his corner as a blur of shadowed green. His large palm closed about her wrist as her fingertips brushed leather. Slowly, he peeled her arm away from the weapon and Karai let out a hiss of pain.

Even at his weakest, the mutant had been stronger than most men (or women, in this case). Which is why she took such measures to ensure he remained sedated. All of her strength shook against his as she tried to free herself from his grasp.

She dropped her weight back with a snarl and tried to kick his feet from beneath him.

Raph moved at the same moment, shoving her down as he leaped out of her kick range. Karai's foot met bare air and carried her too far around. She caught herself on her palms and realized with a sickening jolt that her back was exposed to him. She tried to right herself only to have a heavy heel crash into her shoulder.

The woman was thrown across her office, rolling until she struck her side against the front of her desk. She swiveled to her knees, raking her hair back as she spun to face him. Her free hand swept over the carpet, snagging a large piece of glass from the display case.

He closed the gap between them with slow steps, allowing her the change to gain her feet. Karai did so, rising with her new weapon and eyeing the distance between them. Raphael paused, glancing to the sharp shard in her grip.

His mouth quirked in a smirk. "Game's no fun if ya ain't got tha advantage, huh?"

"What advantage have you?" she demanded.

She lunged forward before he could answer, intent on plunging the jagged tip of the shard into the side of his neck. The younger ninja jerked back, sparing his neck from the attack. But the glass carried on and sliced his bicep as it passed. His hand came up and once again, Karai found her arm in his tight grip.

The glass fell from her fingers when his other hand slammed into her throat. Karai was taken off her feet. She lingered in air for a beat before her brought her down on top of the desk. Karai cried out as the back of her skull cracked off one of the cameras. The device shot from beneath her, clattering to the ground as Karai grabbed her drenched hair. Her fingers slipped through a sudden presence of warmth amid the frigid strands.

Raphael jumped onto the desk himself, keeping her pinned. His foot settled beside her left shoulder while he knee nudged in close to her right. He knelt over her, golden eyes narrowed and merciless. The ceiling fan lazily rotated above his head.

The woman drew her breath, steeling herself as she glared up at him.

"This is Leonardo's play?" she ground out through clenched teeth. "To have you do what he never could?"

He didn't answer, resting an elbow on his upraised knee. A silence grew between them, betraying the seething storm that still consumed his mind. Karai let out a harsh laugh to regain his attention.

"Come, Raphael, be done with it!" she hissed. "Prove to your leader that you're still capable of killing on his command."

He let out a growl and his hand went to his waist, reemerging with a bright glint of silver.

"Leo's got no say in this, Karai," he spat. "I wanted ta come tonight. I wanted ta see ya -"

"So he would have you believe-" she began to scoff.

The sai flashed before she could have expected it. A second later, she felt heat gliding along her cheek. A deep, burning sensation was not far behind and she blinked in surprise.

The beast had cut her.

She lifted a bewildered hand to the wound.

"Get this," Raphael growled, his hatred rumbling through his words. "Ya fooled me for a while, I'll give ya that, but now its ov'a, girlie. I paid yer due against my family like ya wanted. We're done."

Ice filled the woman's face as she glared at him. "Until you filthy creatures know my suffering to the fullest extent, this will never be done, Raphael. The grudge still stands."

His lip curled in distaste. "Grudge all ya want. But if ya ev'a touch my family again, ya won't get the chance to play yer little game with Leo." He leaned lower, allowing the soiled tip of his sai to ghost before her nose. "An' I ain't so forgivin' as Fearless, capiche?"

Karai lowered her chin, looking past the steely weapon with a small smile. "You disappoint me, Raphael. Fueling yourself with such violent promises. It's as if you haven't learned a thing."

"You'd be surprised," he sneered, bracing more of his weight over her. "Stay tha hell away from us."

She let out a small yelp as a matching slice tore over her other cheek. The turtle's weight vanished. Karai heard a crunch of glass and the silence filled her office. Pushing herself up, she circled

around the room, coming to edge of the carpet and the shattered windows. The warm, summer breeze pulled through her soaked hair as she looked out in the night.

Far below, there was the roar of a battered engine surging to life. Karai watched a tiny moving van angle out of a parking space and shoot into the darkness with a black plume of exhaust.

She stood at the top of her tower in silence, her green eyes searing the building across from herself. Her hands coiled into trembling fists. The daughter of Oroku Saki (the most powerful being that might have ruled this wretched world) stood thwarted by her enemies once again.

The blood that been unleashed and spared by Raphael continued to slip down her neck.

The shriek of her fury was lost amid the city's streets.

Despite the heat that had settled onto New York, the sewer tunnels were cool and dark. Familiar. Comforting. Raphael followed the worn paths he and his brothers had trodden down throughout the years.

When the others had been sure that he safely exited the building, they had taken off on the street below. He, on the other hand, had chosen to take a slower route home. Passing over the rooftops on his own for the first time since his escape, he relished every feeling he had longed for inside of that cramped cell.

He grinned as the breeze blew over his shoulders and laughed when he jumped from building to building, catching sight of the alleys far below. He even enjoyed the sharp impact that was driven up his legs at each landing. The night was nothing but open air and freedom and he had missed it so.

An hour into his jaunt, he got a text from Mikey, checking on him.

He wrote back, assuring his brother that he was fine. Just taking a walk.

Mikey sent him a smiley face in reply.

He could feel Don and Leo's concern filtering from the other side of that screen as well. He could not fault their worry. It had had taken three weeks before he dared to face the endless darkness that lay outside of the Lair's front door. Another month after that, he only began to think of his return to the surface world.

He had spent too long in that tiny room where the only breaks were met with torment and pain. As a result, the world had grown in his mind, becoming larger and filled with more evil shadows than he could remember. Shadows stuffed full of villains and nightmares. Out of his sight and out of his ability to control. It was too much for him to face alone.

And it had only been the stability of his father that had guided out of their little sanctuary once again. Just as diligent and watchful as he had been when Raphael was a child, he had returned with his grown son to the intricate system of tunnels and drains of New York City's sewer system.

He had remained close on the trip to the abandoned subway system to reunite with Leatherhead and, eventually, with his paw encased inside Raph's large palm, Splinter had led his child up to the city.

Tonight, however, Raphael was on his own.

After leaving Karai's tower whole and unscathed, he found himself visiting his old haunts. Secluded perches following Broadway Street and Fifth Avenue where he could watch the infinite streams of humanity shifting beneath him. He went to the stretch of apartment buildings whose rooftops served as a perfect obstacle course for a turtle needing to blow off steam.

He stopped by Casey's apartment and when he realized the man wasn't home, he went to April's. He stood out front of her antique shop just marveling at the newest display of trinkets she had set up. But when he had finally gone up the fire escape, he found the couple had fallen asleep watching a movie on the couch.

Raph left them that way, making a promise that he'd come back earlier the next day for a real reunion. One where his brothers and fathers were present as well. Allowing him the chance to really come home.

He continued along the sewer tunnel with his head bowed, listening to the water running past him. It was strange how many sounds he had lost in his captivity without notice. While the trickle of open sewage would never be described as the ideal setting, at least he *could* hear it.

He was free to enjoy it.

Well, almost, anyway.

You should have killed her .

Raph rolled his eyes. Yes, "Leo's" voice was still with him. Plaguing his triumphs and relishing every pitfall the turtle had endured throughout this long road. Continually ready to offer his opinion of the recovery warrior (which, to say the least, hadn't improved any over the past few months).

Raphael did his best to ignore him, especially around the others. He was actually quite good at these days. Again, with a lot of help from his father, but they both knew something had to be done about the lingering disquiet within the largest turtle's spirit. Raph just hadn't known if he had the strength and fortitude to tackle something like that until now.

But, seeing as he'd already faced one tormenter this evening, why shouldn't he face the other?

He looked to the right, towards the dark corner at the edge of his vision where the specter had taken permanent residence during his stay.

"What good would it have done?" he muttered, his deep voice rumbling through the tunnel.

"Leo's" shadow following the wall, swiveled around to walk backwards at Raph's side. His white eyes gleamed.

Well, *I* would have felt better.

"Ya think so?"

A sly smile unveiled teeth from within the shadowy face, **You have no idea.**

Raph lifted his brow and hooked his thumbs into his belt, just behind the hilt of his sai. "Yeah, me too."

So if we both wanted to...why didn't you?

Raphael walked in silence a few moments, pondering the question. At last, he drew a breath through his nose. "I dunno...maybe...maybe if I did, it would'a been proof that she was right about us. That we're jes animals, aft'a all." He frowned. "Even if she's about me, it wouldn' be fair ta Mikey, Donnie, or Leo. Or Masta Splinter either," he added as an afterthought.

How very *noble* of you.

Raph's golden eyes narrowed. "Sides, you were tha one who was so adamant 'bout killin' Donnie, too. An' I still ain't yer stooge, Leo."

The figure dropped his head back in exasperation. **Still on that, are we? Still so certain that you and I aren't one and the same? That my brothers and myself didn't stem from somewhere inside that skull of yours?** If possible, his vivid eyes gleamed brighter, but only to fade away, revealing irises that were a mirror to Raphael's own.

Your stubbornness is commendable, Raphael...or pathetic, depending on the day, I suppose.

Raphael sighed and looked away, his stomach turning at the grin that was far too much like his own. "Maybe yer right...maybe ya are a part'a me."

He felt the triumph radiating from the black outline on the wall and so he looked back into that wicked face to quell it.

"If that's tha case, then ya ain't nothing but a bad thought who got 'is chance to keep on talking. But I'm so damn sick'a listenin' ta ya, Leo."

His companion's grin vanished. **Yer not serious** , he hissed. The facade of Leonardo slipped at the finality he spotted in Raph's face. **Ya can't face this world without me, Raphael! I'm the reason we're still here.**

The turtle lifted a helpless shoulder. "I don' recall ya doin' anythin' ta get us outta that hole. That was my brother, remember? Not you, right? Since you're still me?"

"Leo" stared at him, seething in silence.

"That's what I figure, anyhow," Raph said lightly as he continued to walk.

You won't make it on your own, Raphael! Ya never could!

It was then that Raphael rounded a corner, the light casting his shadow ahead of him on the wall. He looked down the tunnel and a slight grin touched mouth. "Good thing I ain't really alone then, huh?"

The smoky figure followed his gaze and let out a hiss of frustration when he found their eyes had settled upon the hidden entrance to the Lair.

"Looks like I found my way home, Leo. Whether ya helped or not, it doesn't matter. It's time ya got back ta wherev'a tha hell ya came from, 'cause I ain't listenin ta yer crap anymore." The turtle shrugged at the wicked scowl he received and then returned to his pace, walking towards the door. "I'll see ya around," he called over his shoulder.

He felt the other's indigence following him for a moment before it suddenly seemed as if "Leo's" anger was spent. Raph felt a movement in his heart and to him it appeared like the shadow's stride was slowly beginning to match his steps. Its arms swung at the same slow rhythm as his own. Then, the specter which had haunt Raphael for so long began to melt away, a part of it merging into the softer, more natural shadow that moved along the brick wall.

Raph's steps faltered when the frigid hole Karai had burrowed deep within his chest bubbled with warmth. Warmth that was then fanned into a flame he had not felt in months. Raph breathed deep as heat seared though his veins and ran down to his very toes and fingertips and pulled back his shoulders into a wider stance. When he opened his eyes again, they churned with the light of the fire, bold and defiant against the darkness.

It was then that Raphael finally made his way home.

By the time he had punched in the code for the door, it was much later than when he had promised Mikey he would be back. The entrance slid open, unleashing a burst of warm air into the sewers, and Raphael stepped inside. He was intent on going from room to room for a while, just to sit and soak in the beauties of his humble home for the sole reason that he just wanted to.

His plan was deterred, however, by an obstacle in his path.

Leonardo, being the ever diligent brother he was, had dragged one of the kitchen chairs into the foyer to wait for Raphael. His arms were folded across his plastron and his legs were stretched out before

him, crossed at the ankles. His chin had fallen forward and he was breathing slow and even. Out cold.

Raph looked at him for a moment, thinking on all they had endured over the past months. He thought of everything he had put Mikey and Don and their father through and made a silent oath that he would make it all up to them and more if he could. He owed them that much.

But Leo...Leo had been the one to chase him down behind enemy lines. Even after he'd already been brought home. As he stood there, Raph couldn't remember if he had even uttered a thanks to his leader for that one sacrificial move he had made on behalf of his brother.

He moved forward, easing himself to a knee before the other. Leo sniffed in his sleep, but did not rouse. With a soft scoff of amusement, Raphael reached out to shake the other's leg.

Leonardo stirred, inhaling sharply as he righted himself and looked around with wild dark eyes. He squinted at the turtle in front of him and, when he was finally able to focus, shook his head.

"Raph?" he asked, huskily.

Raphael grinned at him and tipped his head. A glint of mischief flashed in his eyes.

"Hey, Fearless," he said.

- The End -

A/N: That's it, guys. *Colorblind* is officially complete! (Victory lap around the house - unruly black cats flee in terror). I hope you enjoyed it! I hope you liked the ending! Big thanks to everyone who stayed with me during this story! All your comments, concerns, critiques, everything was essential to bringing this to a close! Cyber hugs to everyone!

Catch ya later! ~ ST

P.S. ~ I still love reviews, you know, for anyone who has thoughts on this final chapter! I'm just saying...